THE HORUS HERESY
Graham McNeill
ANGEL EXTERMINATUS
Flesh and iron
From the New York Times bestselling author of
A Thousand Sons

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THE HORUS HERESY™

Graham McNeill

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended. The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The III Legion 'Emperor's Children'

Fulgrim, Primarch of the Emperor's Children
Fabius, Apothecary of the Emperor's Children
Eidolon, 'The Risen', Lord Commander
Julius Kaesoron, 'The Favoured Son', First Captain
Marius Vairosean, Captain, 3rd Company
Lucius, The Eternal Blademaster
Kalimos, 'The Whipmaster', Captain, 17th Company
Lonomia Ruen, Captain, 21st Company
Bastarnae Abranxe, Captain, 85th Company
Krysander of the Blades, Captain, 102nd Company

The IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'

Perturabo, Primarch of the Iron Warriors
Forrix, 'The Breaker', First Captain, Triarch
Obax Zakayo, Lieutenant, 1st Grand Battalion
Berossus, Warsmith, 2nd Grand Battalion
Galian Carron, Techmarine, 2nd Grand Battalion
Harkor, Warsmith, 23rd Grand Battalion, Triarch
Kroeger, Lieutenant, 23rd Grand Battalion
Soltarn Vull Bronn, 'The Stonewrought', 45th Grand Battalion
Barban Falk, Warsmith, 126th Grand Battalion
'Honourable' Soulaka, Apothecary, 235th Grand Battalion
Toramino, Warsmith, Master of the Stor-bezashk
Cadaras Grendel, Legionary

The Sisypheum

Ulrach Branthan, Captain, Iron Hands 65th Clan-company
Cadmus Tyro, Equerry to Captain Branthan
Frater Thamatica, Ironwrought, Morlock veterans
Sabik Wayland, Iron Father
'Karaashi' Bombastus, Dreadnought
Vermana Cybus, Morlock veteran
Septus Thoic, Morlock veteran
Ignatius Numen, Battle-brother
Nykona Sharrowkyn, Raven Guard Legion, 66th Company
Atesh Tarsa, Apothecary, Salamanders Legion, 24th Company

The Ebonite Archymsts

Karuchi Vohra, Ovate Seer of the Paths Above
Varuchi Vohra, Ovate Seer of the Paths Below

The VII Legion 'Imperial Fists'

Felix Cassander, Captain, 42nd Company
Navarra, Legionary, 6th Company

‘The call of death is a call of love. Death can be sweet if we answer it in the affirmative, if we accept it as one of the great eternal forms of life and transformation; the moment where man becomes something greater than his rude beginnings: a flying, godlike, shimmering, diaphanous, beautiful creature. That will be my apotheosis, where I become a general principal of Being, instantiated throughout all of the vistas of the Imperium.’

– The Primarch Fulgrim, *My Phoenician Imago*

‘Guilt upon the soul, like rust upon iron, both defiles and consumes it, gnawing and creeping into it, until at last it eats out the very heart and substance of the metal. But if all the world hates you, and believes you wicked, while your own conscience absolves you from guilt, you will not be without friends.’

– The Primarch Perturabo, *In Willing Sacrifice*

‘And I assure you, my children, it will not be long before your domain has become a place of insanity as the Angel Exterminatus sends his consorts, daemons in human flesh, to kill and maim. All shall suffer at the hands of this avatar of debauchery, and from its heart shall be loosed countless numbers of daemons, for the gates of damnation are opening wide.’

– Fragment of Firenzii manuscript, *The Division of the Prophecies*

BOOK ONE

TERRA FIGULA

Theogonies – I

Death below, the unknown above. One choice. A moment's inattention or a single slip and he would be dead, broken on the knife-bladed rocks below. His fingers were bloody, gripping the cliff by the narrowest handholds. The muscles in his calves were vibrating like plucked strings, and his arms burned with acids, though he had no memory of exerting himself.

How had he come to this place?

He had no answer to that, nor did he know much of anything save that the rugged wall of rock before him was slick with water and vanished into the mists of rain above him. What lay at the top of this cliff? No answer was forthcoming, but what lay at the bottom was clear enough. His right hand was cramping, and he eased each finger from the rock with the gentlest effort, trying to lessen the pain in each joint.

Long black hair hung before his eyes and he shook his head to clear his vision. The motion almost hurled him from the cliff and he clamped his fingers even harder onto the rock. He spat rainwater and looked up into the grey smirr of misty clouds. How close was the top of this cliff? Would it be easier to climb or was the ground, distant as it was, closer?

There was no way of knowing, but he had to make a decision soon.

A bad decision was better than no decision, and he understood that he had only two options. Retreat to a known fate or climb to an uncertain future. Though he had no memory of himself, he knew that going backwards was not in his nature. A decision, once made, had to be seen through to the end, for good or ill. How he knew this about himself he didn't know, but with the decision made, he knew it was the right one.

He lifted his right hand and slid it up the cliff, looking for a higher handhold, and, finding one, gripped it tightly. Gently, he eased his left hand up and took hold of a thin slice of protruding rock. With his hand safe, he lifted his foot, the bare sole torn open (by climbing this far?) and placed it securely. He pushed down and lifted his body higher, feeling a potent sense of victory at even this small distance.

With agonising slowness and patience, he climbed upwards again, each movement painful and dangerous, but achieved with a relentless determination that he would not fail. The rain intensified and lashed his body with icy needles, as though spitefully seeking to dislodge him from the rock.

Rain, exhaustion and pain all conspired to weaken his resolve, but the more their combined efforts attempted to prise him loose, the harder he gripped. Hand over hand, one foot after the other, he pushed himself higher and higher. Each moment of ascension was a rebirth, each continued breath a revelation. The rocks below diminished as he climbed, yet the clouds above seemed to climb with him, revealing yet more of the cliff, but no sign of a summit.

For all he knew, there might never be an end to the cliff. He might climb until his strength finally gave out and he fell to his death. The thought did not trouble him overmuch. Better to fail after all effort has been expended than to die never having found the limits of his endurance. That gave him strength, and he climbed onwards, faster now that the mountain had become his enemy, a thing to be overcome. With an enemy to focus his thoughts, his strength grew and his will to succeed sharpened to a razor's edge.

Now all he could see above or below him was the cliff face, an implacable black wall that wanted him to fail and die. He gritted his teeth and spat at the rock before him in anger. Blood ran down his arms in thick runnels, his hands torn and opened to the bone by the jutting slivers of rock bearing his weight, but the pain was nothing compared to the thought of letting this ascent beat him.

Why the thought of defeat should be so painful to him when he did not fear to die he did not know. After all, what did a man with no memory or future have to fear? On the heels of that thought came another. Looking at the thinness of his arms and his imagined height, he guessed he was not a man, but a boy.

His body was that of a youngster, one with a solid and muscular physique, but a boy nonetheless. Was this climb the result of some boyhood dare or initiation? A test of his manhood or some coming-of-age ritual? A thought danced on the edges of recall, a brusque figure of towering proportions instilling a will of iron within him, daring him to fail and knowing that he would not.

The memory faded, but with its departure another feeling stole upon his thoughts.

He was not alone.

Someone – or something – was watching him.

That was surely ridiculous, for who else would be so foolish as to climb a sheer cliff in the rain? Yet the thought persisted. Finding a ledge where he could

rest without tearing open the many gashes on his feet, he eased his body around so that his back was to the cliff. The mist had descended, and an impenetrable sheen of moist fog obscured whatever lay before him, but in descending, it had revealed a measure of the sky above.

He saw the stars.

A veil of beauteous darkness strewn with pinpricks of brightness, sprays of light from unimaginably distant suns. He knew of stars: what they were and the chemical anatomy of their life-cycles, but where he had obtained this knowledge was as mysterious as how he had come to be on this cliff.

They wheeled above him in a sweeping arc, constellations and auroras like sunbursts.

And at the heart of it all was something else, something that had always been there, always watching him, and which always would. Dimly he sensed that this was no benevolent guardianship, but the patience of a hunter stalking its prey.

Like an ocean maelstrom lifted from the seas and set amongst the heavens, it spun with sickly colours and diseased froths of matter and light. A region of space that swallowed time and spat out its doomed fragments, it stared down at him like the eye of something monstrous and colossal, a power young to the universe yet which would outlive the stars themselves.

It made him sick to his stomach to see it and he closed his eyes as a lurching sense of vertigo slipped over him. His legs wobbled and he was suddenly dislocated from control of his body. His back came away from the cliff face and he felt the vast empty space in front of him, the dizzying sense of standing on a slender ridge of stone thousands of metres above the ground.

His hand scrabbled at the rock, but found no purchase. His body leaned out over the abyssal depths as his mind screamed at him to fight this weakness. A scratching finger found a thin crack in the rock and he jammed his hand into it as his body swung out into empty air.

Pain tore at his arm as his entire weight fell from the ledge. He bunched his fist as he felt his grip slipping, skin tearing back from the top of his hand. He gritted his teeth and fought against the flailing panic welling up within him. Anger fuelled him and forced it down.

Someone had abandoned him on this rock face and left him to die. He knew this with a certainty that was unshakable as it was unknown. Why would anyone leave a youth with no memory to die? What purpose would it serve? His anger at this needlessly cruel baptism of fire imposed an icy calm on him, and he took a deep breath as he blotted out the pain from his injured hand.

And then he saw something emerging from the mist above him, a length of rope being lowered down the sheer face of the cliff.

'Grab hold, boy,' said a voice above him. 'Hurry now.'

The mist parted and he saw the top of the cliff, perhaps fifty metres above him, its lip fringed with thick gorse and wiry bracken. A group of men in white and gold armour were silhouetted against the night sky. Two of them held the rope, while another in a red-crested helm shouted to him again.

'Come on, boy, we've got better things to do than haul your sorry arse up the cliff.'

His lip curled in contempt at the man's dismissal of his chances of making the climb unaided. He reached up and secured a hold with his free hand, and let out a pained breath as the tension in his other hand eased. His feet found purchase after a quick scrabble, and he eased his bloodied hand from the crack in the rock.

'I'll climb myself,' he said. 'I don't need anyone's help.'

The man shrugged and said, 'Suit yourself. Climb or fall, it's all the same to me.'

The rope slithered back up the cliff and, with the end of his ordeal in sight, he found fresh reserves of strength to climb. Hand over hand he ascended, his confidence growing with every metre he gained in the war against the cliff. The closer he came to the top, the more numerous the handholds became, as though the cliff had finally accepted it would not claim his life. He pushed up once more and groped for a handhold, but his hand met only air, and he realised he'd reached the top.

Armoured gauntlets reached out to him, but he shucked them off and stood, exhausted, at the top of the cliff. His heart battered his ribs and the blood surged around his body in triumph. Despite the pain, he knew he was grinning from ear to ear. He sucked in a great draught of air and blinked grit from his eyes.

And saw the fortress.

It dominated the skyline all around, a squatting immensity that looked to have been carved from the very summit of the mountain. Surrounded by high walls of impervious stone and rounded, weapon-studded towers, only the roofs of its grand temples and glittering palaces were visible through marble embrasures.

He had no knowledge of this place, but knew it was where he was meant to be.

He took a step towards its great bronze gates, but white-armoured warriors surrounded him, raising weapons with fluted barrels and elaborate firing mechanisms.

‘Don’t take another step,’ said the man in the crested helmet, drawing a long, slender-barrelled pistol of chased gold and silver steel from its holster. Caged lightning crackled in a glass cylinder breech.

The boy looked at the pistol aimed at his chest, but he was not afraid.

‘You threw me a rope and now you’re going to kill me?’ he said. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Who are you, and why do you approach Lochos in secret?’

‘Lochos?’ he said, pointing to the fortress. ‘Is that Lochos?’

‘It is,’ said the man, his pistol wavering as their eyes met.

‘Who is its master?’ he asked in the voice of a much older body.

‘Dammekos is its master, the Tyrant of Lochos,’ replied the man, as though surprised he had answered at all.

‘And who are you?’

‘Miltiades…’ said the man, hesitantly. ‘Sub-Optio in the 97th Grand Company of Lochos.’

‘Take me to Dammekos, Sub-Optio Miltiades,’ commanded the boy, and Miltiades nodded.

He swept his eyes around the rest of the warriors, meeting each man’s gaze and watching as, one by one, they lowered their weapons.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Miltiades, still sounding confused at the words he was saying, but unable to stop himself from speaking. ‘Follow me.’

The boy walked with Miltiades over the rough terrain, following the line of the rocks until the edges of a road came into sight. As he set foot on the hard-packed earth of the road, he turned back to the cliff edge and looked up into the night sky at the leering, unnatural maelstrom of dark light. It seemed much closer now, blotting out the sky with its immense presence, as though spreading over the heavens like an infection.

‘What is that?’ he asked Miltiades.

‘What are you looking at?’

‘That,’ he said, pointing to the malignant wound in the sky.

Miltiades shrugged. ‘I just see stars.’

‘You don’t see the star maelstrom?’

‘Star maelstrom?’

‘You really don’t see it?’ asked the boy. ‘Any of you?’

The warriors around him shook their heads, oblivious to the sight it appeared only he could see. That it was invisible to them was just another of this night’s many mysteries.

‘Who are you?’ asked Miltiades. ‘I should have let you fall, but…’

A number came to mind, but he was so much more than just a number.

He had a name, and now that it had been asked of him, he found that he knew it.

‘Who am I?’ said the boy. ‘I am Perturabo.’

ONE

Beauty in Death

Regeneration

Sentinels

A small detail, almost inconsequential, but important nevertheless. A creature no larger than a man’s thumb: a winged clade with a segmented carapace and a brittle exoskeleton of variegated puce. Atop its head, whiplike antennae tasted the myriad new scents flavouring the air, moving with uncharacteristic slowness as toxic numbness spread throughout its body.

The creature, a Cordatus vespidae, moved with a drunken gait across the churned red mud of the hillside, buffeted by warring thermals gusting from the earthworks sprawling at its base like a virulent plague. Sky-bound anabatic winds carried the smells of war – burned iron, smoky chemical propellants, musky post-human oils, lubricant and blood.

To any student of xentomology, the creature’s behaviour would have seemed strange to say the least. Its feeder mandibles snapped at nothing and its legs twitched as though rogue impulses were firing from its tripartite brain along its nerve stems, like a palsy. Its hive-nest had once been situated in the waving branches of a tall polander tree, but shell-fire had long since reduced the stepped banks of agri-terraces to a cratered wasteland of splintered stumps.

Fire had gutted the nest’s interior and killed the hive-queen, though residual traces of excreted pheromone resins had been strong enough to guide the vespidae back home. Whether pure instinct or a desire to die within its former home had driven the creature to ascend the muddy ridges of the hillside would never be known, but whatever ambition had driven it to complete its upward odyssey was to be thwarted. Its body finally succumbed to the paralysing toxin, injected with a murderer’s thoroughness, and the vespidae ceased its upward climb. It sat unmoving on a flattened berm of earth beneath a shattered terrace of reflective stone. Jutting lengths of rusted steelwork radiated from the wall, like

spread fingers with the ends burned black.

The creature appeared to be dead, but its belly and flanks still rippled with motion. Its head bulged and swelled as its internal structure seemed to rove within its exoskeleton with a frantic desire to reshape itself. Wriggling motion shook its carapace, undulant pressure bending its flexible segments outwards as though they sought to fly away and abandon its dying form. A chitinous plate detached from the creature's body and beneath it writhed a gelatinous, worm-like extrusion, a parasitic passenger sating its newborn hunger by feasting on its host's internal organs.

The cannibalising organism pulled itself from the shell of its birth vessel, its flesh already hardening in the air. From translucency to opacity in a heartbeat, its rapidly forming carapace was a riot of shimmering hues, a wondrous oil spill of colours designed to beguile and entrance. The cracked and husked-out remains of its vespidae host crumbled under the weight of the growing creature, its morphogenesis progressing at a staggering rate.

From a split along the middle, gossamer wings unfolded, dragonfly-long in proportion to its body and edged with a membranous web of trailing cilia. With its wings beginning to beat, a segmented tail of shimmering gold and jet unfolded from beneath the cuckoo creature to give it perfect symmetry.

Though its birth had been horrific and needlessly cruel, its final form was undeniably beautiful. An elegant swan hatched from a bloody carcass, a reminder that even the most terrible cruelty can fashion the greatest beauty.

An iron-shod boot slammed down, crushing the newborn creature into the mud beneath its tread. Brutal proof – if proof were needed – that the living world existed with no thoughts of compassion, justice or mercy.

The owner of the boot, clad in the hulking plates of Cataphractii Terminator armour, stared at the smoke-wreathed mountain and the golden citadel crowning its summit. Unaware of the tiny life he had just snuffed out, Forrix scanned the blasted terraces of the Cadmean Citadel, grudgingly admiring the elegance with which it had been integrated into the local topology and the surrounding city. The warmasons of the Imperial Fists were cold and efficient, but their master understood the first maxim of the victor: that the best people to leave in the wake of your campaigns were those who did not feel they had been conquered.

It was a maxim to which the Iron Warriors paid little heed.

'The conqueror makes fair his walls, and all should welcome him as a liberator,' said Forrix, looking back over his shoulder to the wide valley below.

Sawtooth fortifications surrounded the citadel in jagged layers of razorwire and pugnacious walls, bludgeoning their way across the lower town and tearing through habitations, agriculture, industry and places of wondrous natural beauty with equal aplomb. Redoubts, bunkers, and high-walled donjons grew like rocky stalagmites in a dripping cave, and a pall of smoke hung low over the dusty red valley like a shroud.

The lower reaches of the promontory at the heart of the great starport were now clad in metal, each dawn revealing a higher course of steelwork and scaffolds that crept uphill like a spreading cancer that would climb and climb until the red-and-ochre skin of the mountain was entirely encased. Freshly laid funicular rails came with the steelwork, heavy-gauge tracks that would allow mighty bombards and howitzers to be raised into battery positions hacked into the stepped bedrock. Thus far the Basilisk workhorses of the siege train had shouldered the bulk of the barrage work, but the heavier guns were only days away from being brought high enough to lob fat cauldrons of high explosive into the heart of the citadel.

And when that happened, it was all over.

No fortress could long resist when the lords of the artilleryman's craft were brought to bear. The Iron Warriors would flatten Dorn's mountain and erase all trace of the Cadmean Citadel, heedless of the technological marvels worked into its walls.

Forrix watched the progress of a group of captured city folk hauling long lengths of steel-wound cable uphill, sweating and bloodied by the effort and driven by the whips of Obax Zakayo. Behind them, clawed and spider-limbed construction engines drilled into the mountain to lace its structure with the bolts, fasteners and clamps required of the siegemasters behind them. There was a relentless and pleasing regularity to the work, a dance of logistics, effort and planning that only those versed in the arts of making and unmaking fortifications could appreciate. Amid the brutality, the slavery, the misery and the rape of the landscape there was art and there was beauty of a strange, under-appreciated kind.

'Admiring your handiwork again, triarch?' said Barban Falk, climbing into the shielded observation post below the ruined outwork that marked the point where the Imperial Fists had first broken the earth of this world.

'No, admiring theirs,' he replied, jerking his head uphill. Smoke hung over the citadel, its walls pocked and scarred by shell-fire, but already wreathed in a haze of ancient mechanisms of self-repair. Driving dust squalls and oppressed

sunshine rippled in the mirage of its void shields, throwing up splintered rainbows of distorted light.

‘You always did like living dangerously, didn’t you, Forrix?’ said Falk, the enormous bulk of their armour filling the small space.

Forrix didn’t have to ask what he meant.

Since the debacle at Phall, to speak of the sons of Dorn with anything other than hate was to invite terrible retribution from the Lord of Iron. Had it been anyone else, Forrix wouldn’t have spoken, but as far as any Iron Warrior ever trusted another, he trusted Barban Falk.

‘I know you think the same,’ he said.

‘True, but I know better than to voice it.’

‘You always played the politics better than I did,’ admitted Forrix.

‘Yet you hold a position in the Trident and have the ear of the primarch.’

‘Precious few of us can claim that now,’ said Forrix, with an honesty that surprised him.

Falk shrugged, no easy feat in such a bulky suit of armour. His monstrous Terminator plates were chevroned with gold and jet, and the smoothness of the heavy, barrel-vaulted pauldrons was in stark contrast to the war-worn condition of Forrix’s armour. Falk’s battle gear had originally been crafted for Warsmith Dantioch of the 51st Expedition, but after the triple disasters of Gholghis, Stratopolae and Krak Fiorina it had been reassigned to a more deserving wearer. Like Phall, no Iron Warrior now mentioned Dantioch. His legacy was utterly expunged; his name a byword for failure on an epic scale.

‘I do not claim to understand our master’s mind, but I can read the tides of his anger,’ said Falk, flexing the chisel-like fingers of his power fist, as though carefully weighing his next words. ‘Tides that grow ever stronger and more frequent.’

‘How are the western approaches?’ asked Forrix, unwilling to address Falk’s comment.

Falk chuckled. ‘Do you think I am trying to entrap you, Forrix?’ said the giant warrior, running a hand over his oil-dark hair and narrowing his already hooded eyes. ‘You think I seek to goad you into careless words I can then report back to the primarch? If I had any feelings to be hurt, they would be bleeding to death right now.’

Forrix allowed himself a thin smile. ‘No, I don’t think that,’ he said.

‘Well you should,’ said Falk. ‘I’d betray you in a heartbeat if I thought it would earn me a place in the Trident. Especially now that Golg’s a corpse and

Berossus is as good as a corpse and isn't likely to be elevated.'

'Complete the western approaches in the next day and you might get your wish.'

Falk nodded and pulled a waxy sheet of rolled parchment from the kilt of baked leather at his waist. He passed it to Forrix, who pulled it open and cast his eye over Falk's schematics.

'The work is proceeding as planned,' said Falk, his pride and vaunting ambition plain. 'The breaching batteries will be in place by sundown tonight, and ground-penetrating auspex readings suggest a wall density that will require a sixteen-hour bombardment to carve a practicable breach in the half-moon bastion.'

Forrix let his eyes wander the interleaved lines on Falk's plans, the angles of approach, the interlocking fire pockets, the dead zones and the enfilading redoubts; admiring the brutal functional architecture of his fellow warsmith's plans.

'I see you favour extra storm bastions over breaching batteries,' he said.

Falk had always preferred the blunt directness of frontal assault over the relentless mathematics of a carefully planned approach. Where Forrix viewed the reduction of a fortress as a rigorously applied equation, Falk saw it as a pugilistic battle where both fighters pounded until one was forced to yield.

An unsubtle mindset, but an effective one.

Many beyond the Legion believed this to be the Iron Warriors only means of waging war, but the Lord of Iron was far more subtle than that. Mathematics and the precise application of force made up the bulk of his campaigning, but the brute application of violence made far more dramatic remembrance.

'There are enough guns to bring the walls down, even allowing for those damned repair mechanisms,' replied Falk. 'Once the wall's down, I want enough warriors in place to be sure of punching through the breach. They won't be expecting an escalade in the west.'

'There's a reason for that,' pointed out Forrix. 'The ground there is steeper and rockier than the other flanks. It won't be easy to cover that ground quickly enough to avoid getting shot to pieces. And if there are seismic charges in place, they'll bury you.'

'There won't be.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'The Lord of Iron says there will not be.'

'You have spoken to the primarch?' asked Forrix, struggling to mask the

bilious jealousy flaring in his breast. ‘He has not emerged from his bunker since we made planetfall.’

‘He sends word through the Stonewrought,’ spat Falk, referring to Soltarn Vull Bronn, a warrior of the 45th Grand Battalion whose understanding of stone was such that some whispered it spoke to him, confiding its secrets and opening up its geological wonders to the touch of his entrenching tool. Perturabo, ever quick to recognise raw talent, now favoured Vull Bronn, despite the inferiority of his rank next to the three exalted warsmiths of the Trident who normally attended upon him.

‘Does he send word of the Third Legion?’

Falk shook his head. ‘No, he demands only that Cassander’s men must all be dead and this citadel in ruins before the Phoenician’s warriors arrive.’

Forrix grunted, his measure of the Emperor’s Children’s worth wordlessly expressed. ‘This prosecution will be done with long before then.’

As if to underscore Forrix’s words, the percussive drumbeat of artillery fire echoed from the far side of the mountain. Both warriors looked up as the echoes were carried away by the hot winds whipping around the mountainside. Forrix listened to the rhythm of the guns, as a maestro listens to the orchestra at his command, reading the subtle shifts in pitch and timbre of each weapon. He heard the urgency in the firing and the haste with which each gun was unleashing its explosive ordnance.

‘It’s coming from the north,’ said Forrix, reaching for the helmet mag-locked to his armour.

‘Harkor’s warriors,’ replied Falk.

‘Come on,’ said Forrix, turning and stalking from the observation post.

‘That’s not breaching fire,’ said Falk, arriving at the conclusion Forrix had already reached.

‘No,’ agreed Forrix. ‘The bloody fool’s mounting an escalade.’

Pain. It always came back to pain.

Berossus’s last memory had been of pain, of his life bleeding out through the broken meat-puppet his flesh had become. Bones smashed beyond the ability of any Apothecary to knit, organs pulped with seismic force and the searing heat in his flesh as the fearsome power of his genhanced metabolism tried in vain to undo the mortal wound done to him.

The pain was intense and had never left him, but worse than the pain was the shame of *how* he had been wounded. Not at the hands of an enemy warrior

capable of wreaking harm on a battle-engineered post-human, nor at the hands of a terrible alien creature too hideous and nightmarish for him to overcome.

No, this pain had been wrought by the hands of his primarch.

The blow had been swift, too swift to avoid, and too thorough in its unmaking of his body for him ever to recover. Another had swiftly followed, an unnecessary blow, for he was already dead by any conventional measure of the word. But the IV Legion never did anything half-heartedly, and Perturabo's attack was that martial philosophy distilled into two swift strikes.

Gulping blood down his ruptured oesophagus and frothing it out through his perforated lungs, Berossus had waited to die as he had lived. Embittered and in pain.

Ever since the war against the Black Judges and the screaming mob of hooded Accusators that had caught him off guard he had lived with pain. Individually, the Accusators were no match for a warrior of the Legiones Astartes, but he had been surrounded by a dozen, each armed with a chain-gavel that could cut armour apart with lethal ease.

Six died before they could touch him, but then their blows began to tell, cutting him apart piece by piece until the tearing teeth of an enemy weapon had all but ripped through his spine. He'd killed them all with the last of his strength before falling to the ground as his legs failed him. The Apothecaries had found him surrounded by their black-hooded bodies and worked wonders on his injured flesh. His body was remade and strengthened with augmetics and nerve grafts, but the pain of the ordeal never left him.

That pain had been eclipsed in one moment of incautious speaking. It had been his misfortune to bring ill-favoured news to the Lord of Iron, whose volatile moods had steadily worsened since the slaughters of Isstvan V. He had known his news was bad, but had hoped his position as a warsmith would keep him from harm.

A foolish hope, for Perturabo's rages fell on high kings and holy fools alike.

Since then, blackness for the most part.

Muttered voices, sudden stabbing light and a sensation of floating, disembodied on a dark ocean. He felt dislocated, adrift and bereft of all the points of reference he had, until now, taken for granted. Berossus had tried to listen to the beat of his heart, thinking that if he could cling to that metronomic beat then he might have some means, however transitory, of measuring the passage of time. Yet his heart was silent, and in his timeless madnesses he would often wonder if he had died and was trapped in some heathen limbo. He rejected

the thought, but it would return to plague him often, a nagging suspicion that his life was over, yet would not end.

Memories intruded as he floated between life and death, a parade of conquest in service of the Emperor and, latterly, Warmaster Horus. He saw wars fought in the red rain, dug through the flesh of countless worlds, and ripped the meat from the bones of a hundred thousand foes. He saw righteous wars of species survival, fought by the light of Terra's sun, twist under the transformative pressure of time, becoming wars of conquest, which in time became wars fought for the sake of the vicarious thrill of it.

When had that happened?

How had the martial traditions of the Iron Warriors been perverted so completely?

Berossus knew the answer well enough. Piece by piece, inch by inch, the Emperor's wars had worn the proud warriors of the IV Legion down to little more than grinding machines bedecked in the blood and mud of the worlds they dragged into compliance. Perturabo's warriors had done all that had been asked of them and their only reward was to be thrown back to the very wars that were poisoning the heart of their Legion.

And then, the bitterest pill to swallow…

Berossus remembered the words Warmaster Horus had spoken to the Lord of Iron after the wrack of lost Olympia and the news that the wolves of Fenris had been loosed upon the fair isle of Prospero.

'The use of force alone is a temporary solution,' Horus had said. 'It may subdue for a moment, but it does not remove the necessity of subduing again. And the Imperium will not be at peace if we must perpetually reconquer those we have rendered compliant. You, my brother, will ensure that *one* conquest is enough.'

Perhaps the Warmaster's words had been intended as a balm for Perturabo's tortured soul, but so dark a benediction had only driven him deeper into abyssal guilt. What might once have appeared as the basest of treacheries now seemed like the only logical course, and Perturabo had reaffirmed his oaths of loyalty to Horus.

No one knew what else had passed between these two demigods, but when the Iron Warriors had set foot on Isstvan V, it was with a murderous rage that could only be quenched in the blood of those they had once called brothers.

Berossus floated through the chaos of the massacre on the black sand, the savage joy he had taken in the shock of betrayal on the faces of every midnight-

skinned Salamander and ivory-faced Raven Guard. Of the Iron Hands, he had seen little, for the Phoenician's warriors were making sport of them, their debaucheries unseemly but effective.

He remembered killing a Salamanders captain with a close-range blast of his meltagun, relishing the irony of ending his life with fire. The warrior's helmet had run molten from his face, leaving the skull exposed and as black as the skin that sloughed from the bone like hot oil. Even as he died, the warrior had cursed him in a bubbling series of liquid gasps that made no sense. He'd left the Salamander to choke on his own liquidised flesh, dismissing the curse as a vestigial remnant of his upbringing on a feral world of savage-born reptile hunters.

Drifting in this timeless limbo of pain and isolation, the Salamander's molten visage returned to haunt his nightmares, a leering skull with coal-red eyes that bored into him with accusatory force. The screaming skull never left him, braying meaningless static and pressing close to his awareness, forcing him to relive the agonies it had known in its final moments.

Behind the skull was another face, a bitter granite-carved mask with cold, blue-steel eyes and a voice before which all else was white noise. It commanded the blackened bone of the Salamander, telling it that Berossus would not die as everything else had died. Even in his disembodied state, Berossus knew these were commands that could not be ignored.

The Salamander's skull brought life, but most of all it brought pain, its red eyes reducing him to scraps with chanted evocations. Berossus tried to retreat from its calls, but it had strength beyond what was left to him and a hunger for his suffering.

He felt a jolt of screaming agony course around his body, a shuddering paroxysm of electric rebirth, and even as dimensions of space and form coalesced around him he loosed a shuddering roar as he felt the immense power in his limbs.

The world of darkness in which he had existed for what felt like an eternity was washed away in a cascade of painful colours that made him want to close his eyes. The colours bled away, but not his rage, and he shook as he saw the Salamander's red-eyed skull before him.

Except it wasn't a Salamander and it wasn't a skull.

The Techmarine's eye lenses were whirring optics, enlarged orbs of clicking armatures and rotating ruby lenses mounted on a bulbous apparatus of bronze and silver. His helm was blackened iron and a trio of hissing pneumatics

crouched at his shoulders like obedient stingers of metal and dripping fluids.

‘Who are you?’ he said, his voice a grating bark that sounded nothing like he remembered.

‘I am Galian Carron, and you are in my war-forge,’ said the Tech-marine, who stepped back with a wary flinch as Berossus shook in the unbreakable fetters that bound him. Carron was looking up at him, for he was taller by far than the Techmarine. Grey-fleshed servitors and heavy lifter gear stood around him, some before him, some behind him – though how he could see them was, at present, a mystery. A host of robed acolytes bearing oiled platters, upon which were a variety of cogs, gear and machine parts knelt behind Carron; the Techmarine’s devotees.

No, not Carron’s devotees.

His.

‘Why am I here?’ asked Berossus, feeling unfamiliar walls of cold iron pressing in around him, a life-preserving womb and a sarcophagus all in one. Claustrophobic madness extended a tendril into his mind, and found itself welcome.

‘You are here because the Lord of Iron willed it so,’ said Carron.

‘You lie,’ said Berossus, desperate and yet hopeful. ‘He killed me.’

‘No, he has transformed you.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Berossus.

‘By his own hand he has remade you in his image,’ said Carron as one of his wheezing pneumatics reached up and took hold of a rubberised control box. At the press of a button, the fetters binding Berossus’s limbs unclamped with a mechanised sound of grinding metal. His legs, twin columns of iron, steel and fibre-bundle muscles were his again to command, and he took a ponderous step forwards, knowing, with his first, that there would be no release from this entombment in an iron coffin.

The sound of his splay-clawed footfalls rang from the floor plates of the war-forge with a boom of metal on metal. His arms, a monumental hammer and a heavy-barrelled rotor cannon spun in time with his thoughts.

‘I am alive?’ asked Berossus, not yet ready to believe it.

‘Better,’ said Carron. ‘You are a Dreadnought.’

Holding the citadel had never been a possibility, Captain Felix Cassander of the Imperial Fists knew, but that had never been the point. The Iron Warriors were the enemy, and though his thoughts still balked at the thought of the Legiones

Astartes turning upon one another, the enemy had to be fought.

Yes, the citadel must eventually fall, but Cassander did not hold with the notion of the unwinnable fight, the noble last stand or poetic notions of self-sacrifice. There was always a way to win or at least a way to cheat death, but even he had to admit that there was only the faintest hope of them surviving much longer.

Cassander was not a man to whom pessimism came easily, but it was taking considerable effort of will to keep its dark touch from infecting his thoughts.

When the Iron Warriors finally overcame the citadel's ancient defences and broke open its walls they would run amok. They would slaughter his warriors, the heroic men and women of this world that had chosen to stand with them, and the refugees from the murder fields below. Fifty-two Imperial Fists and thirteen thousand men, women and children were crammed within the citadel's walls.

When the end came, their deaths would not be quick and they would not be painless, but there was no talk of surrender or terms, no seditious mutterings to erode morale and no thought other than resisting these bastard invaders.

The Iron Warriors… our brothers…

No history told who had built this marvel atop the mountain, though the engineers and artisans who had raised its living walls must surely have been the greatest minds of their age. Wrought from stone and rock unknown to this world and laced with technologies whose secrets not even the Mechanicum could fathom, its walls reacted to damage like living tissue. Shell impacts would scab over with liquid silicates, and moments later the wall beneath would be whole again. Only when the hurt was so sustained and so catastrophic would any site of damage be irreparable. Attackers found the wall reacting to them with spiked extrusions of living rock, or were swallowed whole as the stonework opened up beneath them. Against any conventional foe, the fortress would have been, for all intents and purposes, impregnable and indestructible.

But the Iron Warriors were not conventional foes.

Lord Dorn had chosen the living citadel as the site upon which to plant the Aquila, not as a symbol of Imperial dominance, but a seat of governance to be shared by all. He had brought the planet's former rulers into the establishment of an ordered government, allowing the people to choose their own planetary governor, a respected civic leader named Endric Cadmus. Cassander smiled at the memory, thinking that perhaps some of the philosophy of the XIII Legion's primarch had permeated the Imperial Fists after all.

Cassander and his fellow Imperial Fists had escorted the expeditionary

iterators and remembrancers as they went from cities to far-flung townships, spreading word of the Emperor to a people ripe to embrace the Imperial Truth. It had been a glorious time, and when Lord Dorn announced that he was to lead the VII Legion to fresh campaigns, the populace had mourned his departure like the loss of a loved one.

He remembered the pride that filled him when the primarch had given him the solemn duty of standing with his battle company as sentinels to the newly compliant world, a potent sign that this was a world under the protection of the Imperial Fists. But that honourable gesture was to have consequences that not even Lord Dorn could have foreseen.

Cassander wiped dust from his scarred face and spat a mouthful of the wretched stuff to the ground, where it bubbled with a chemical hiss. His helmet was long gone; a bolt-round had punched through the faceplate and blown out in a spray of blood, bone and ceramite. Techmarine Scanion had died early in the fight, and without his direction the forge-servitors were of only limited use when it came to repair work. A few Mechanicum adepts remained, but they spent their days in the heart of the citadel, plumbing its secrets as though there were still a chance they might live to relay anything they might find.

Cassander's features were careworn, as though abraded by the constant winds that scoured every smooth surface on this planet and gave it the texture of coarse sand. Eyes of deep brown that had seen the order of the galaxy overturned without any power to change it were deep-set and melancholic, his cheeks scar-blackened with the explosive passage of the bolt-round that had taken his helm.

When the order came to return to Terra, Cassander began preparations to depart immediately, but the sudden death of his vessel's Navigator had left them stranded until a replacement could be despatched. The following day, word of the Warmaster's treachery and the massacre on Isstvan V reached them, throwing Cassander's world into free-fall.

Pride in an honourable assignment was replaced by frustration and bitter disappointment that they could not fight alongside their brothers, could not call Horus to account for his perfidy and punish those who had trampled their oaths of loyalty into the dust.

But the chance to make war on the traitorous allies of Horus had come soon enough.

The Iron Warriors made planetfall in the wake of a saturation bombardment that reduced the valley and the agri-settlements filling its fertile deltas to ash. Magma bombs and mass drivers boiled away the rivers and reduced fecund earth

to arid dust. The Cadmean Citadel was left untouched, and Cassander still found it difficult to believe that such a precise bombardment was possible.

He knew why, of course.

The Iron Warriors could not pass up this chance to humble the sons of Dorn, and Cassander had rallied his men with grim certitude as the bulk landers of the IV Legion descended on towering columns of firelight.

The technological cunning of the ancient fortress builders, married to the artfully wrought geography and the courage of the defenders, had kept the Iron Warriors at bay for almost three months, but now Cassander's defiance was almost at an end. With three-quarters of his Company slain, and thousands of mortal soldiers dead, he was running out of ways to fight. The citadel had few heavy guns remaining to keep the Iron Warriors from bringing their artillery superiority to bear and overwhelming the citadel's inbuilt defence mechanisms.

The traitors could not be denied for much longer, but every day Cassander's warriors stayed alive kept the enemy from redeploying and bringing their strength to bear elsewhere.

A poor measure of success, but it was all Cassander had left.

He shook off such pessimism, knowing it did not become a warrior of the Imperial Fists to wallow in self pity, and moved to the edge of the northernmost bastion. Once its gleaming ramparts had been a proud example of the military engineer's art. Now they were chewed up ruins-in-waiting. Locris and Kastor crouched behind the largest nubs of dusty stone, golden giants amid the hundreds of dusty ochre-clad local militiamen. Cassander had broken up his few remaining squads, deploying his men throughout the defence to bolster each section of wall and provide strength of heart to the thousands of soldiers who fought alongside them.

The sky strobed with concussive impacts that buckled the air with their force. High explosives on ballistic trajectories flashed and screeched as their impact violence was dissipated by the void-umbra. The shields on the southern approaches were close to failing, but thankfully the enemy wasn't concentrating fire there.

Locris looked up as Cassander hunkered down in the lee of the rampart, and Kastor gave him a nod of acknowledgement.

'They're eager today,' said Kastor, as a thunderous detonation rocked the base of the wall. Kinetic dampers in the citadel's plunging foundations transferred the power of the blast deep into the bedrock of the mountain and the smell of metal shavings and oily secretions wafted up from the silicate scabs forming over the

craters. Rock fragments rained down onto the ramparts, blanketing the long line of soldiers in yet more red dust.

‘Too eager,’ agreed Locris. ‘Something’s happening, the pace has changed.’

Like Cassander, Locris went bareheaded; the same shrapnel fragment that split his battle helm in two had given him the long scar down his cheek and taken his left eye. The scar made him roguish, the eye piratical. Both were wounds to be avenged.

The plastron, pauldrons and greaves of Kastor’s armour were scorched black where the firestorm of an incendiary projectile had peeled the paint from its plates as he shielded a group of wounded soldiers with his body.

‘What do you think, captain? The Digger?’ asked Kastor.

‘I told you, Symeon’s squad spotted the Digger in the east today,’ said Locris. ‘This feels like Scrapper’s men.’

Cassander gripped the hilt of his sword and peered through a split in the rampart, where webs of connective stone tissue had failed to set, watching the uphill avalanche of burnished iron plate through a haze of dust. Smoke-wreathed artillery pits in sheltered batteries far below hurled high-velocity projectiles ahead of the climbing Iron Warriors, while mobile guns on walker platforms struggled to keep up with the assault force. This fresh attack was a salutatory reminder that Perturabo’s sons were warriors first and foremost, siege specialists second. Cassander watched their movements, fluid and aggressive, disciplined yet driven by core-deep fury.

Where had such raw hate come from?

They had taken to distinguishing between the Iron Warriors detachments by giving their commanders derogatory appellations based on their most apparent characteristics. The Digger’s men were bent-backed shovellers, methodical, precise and unstinting in their labours, the Malingerer kept his men in their dugouts as his artillery dropped tonnes of munitions on the citadel, the Voyeur liked to watch proceedings from a spike-topped blockhouse in the centre of the valley.

‘I think you’re right, Locris,’ said Cassander.

Unlike his fellow commanders, Scrapper liked to throw his men at the walls if so much as a sniff of an assault opportunity presented itself. Where other Iron Warriors displayed a measure of caution towards the citadel’s defences and an appreciation for the careful, step-by-step methodology of siege warfare, Scrapper liked to get his legionaries bloody in the swirling crucible of combat.

Cassander dropped back into cover as a whining solid slug zipped overhead.

‘Makes it easier, I suppose,’ noted Kastor. ‘His men have no fire discipline worth a damn.’

‘Maybe not, but they’re hard fighters,’ said Cassander. ‘We give them insulting names, but don’t ever underestimate them.’

‘Duly noted, captain,’ said Kastor, placing a fist in the centre of his scorched breastplate.

Locris held up a spoon-handled detonator trigger and said, ‘You want the pleasure of these ones, captain?’

Cassander risked another glance through the rampart as the citadel’s artillery pieces opened up on the advancing Iron Warriors. Those guns alone weren’t going to make much of a dent in the assault force, but any thinning of the ranks could only be a good thing.

‘You do it,’ he said. ‘You’ve more than earned it.’

Locris grinned and mashed the trigger, detonating the last of the seismic mines dug into the northern slopes at the forefront of the Iron Warriors attack. Mushrooming blasts of tectonic shockwaves ripped a three-hundred-metre section of the mountain away and sent it tumbling downhill in a storm of pulverised rock.

Cassander relished the sight of scores of split-open bodies carried downhill in the raging avalanche, and pressed the throat bead of his borrowed vox.

‘All Fists – any movement in your sectors?’

Each of his section leaders replied in the negative, lending further credence to his growing certainty that this was Scrapper’s latest attempt to break the citadel open with a surprise assault. The tempo of the unequal artillery duel picked up as the Iron Warriors drew ever closer, climbing through the deep ditch carved by the seismic mines.

‘Symeon, Esdras, Phyros,’ said Cassander into his throat mic. ‘Re-deploy your men to the northern bastion immediately.’

The enemy artillery shifted their aim as the Iron Warriors closed the last hundred metres between them and the wall. Shells screamed on direct flight paths, slamming into the wall with pounding hammerblows that shook the foundations of the mountain itself. A pressure wave of impact blew up and over the wall and the heat of incendiaries burned at the silicate scabs fighting to resist the detonations.

Cassander knew this was the last chance he would have to blunt the assault force before the Iron Warriors were tearing at the defenders.

‘Wait until they reach the closest markers,’ he ordered, bellowing in a voice

that could reach from one end of the *Phalanx*'s training halls to the other. 'Make every shot count or it won't be Perturabo's whelps you need to worry about!'

TWO

First Blood

Forgebreaker

The Trident Remade

Rubble and impact craters had made the wall scaleable, but the damned self-repair mechanisms were already remaking what the artillery had put asunder. From previous attempts at storming the citadel, Kroeger knew the wall would be flat and featureless in moments, so wasted no time in hurling himself onto the nearest hideously organic wound at the base of its structure.

Instantly, he felt his weight increase, his limbs become leaden and his armour exert an almost insurmountable attraction to the ground. Graviton generators buried beneath the wall were warping the local gravity field, making even the smallest movements an immense effort.

Kroeger roared and pressed himself to the wall, hauling his body upwards with a combination of brute strength and fury. The generators' fields could only reach a few metres from the ground, and with every hauling movement up the textured wall, he felt their grip on him loosening. Behind his faceplate, he grinned as he felt his natural weight restored, and sprang up to the next handhold.

Behind him, three hundred warriors of Lord Harkor's 23rd Grand Battalion knelt in covering positions or set up heavy weapons. Only a very few had the strength to overcome the graviton generators, and these were the bloodiest, meanest and most devoted of the warsmith's killers. And of those men, Kroeger was the bloodiest, meanest and most devoted.

Servitor-crewed weapon turrets emerged from armoured blast shutters midway up the sloped wall and swept the ground with a mixture of heavy shell cannons and lighter infantry cullers. Explosions marched along the base of the wall as weapons and ammo caches exploded. Defenders at the ramparts poured their own fire down the face of the wall where the turrets could not reach.

Lord Harkor's artillery had ceased firing, wary of inflicting friendly casualties,

but the Imperial Fists had no such concerns. Plunging fire was pounding with earth-shattering force on the rock and the warriors clinging to the wall, wreathing the summit of the mountain in acrid smoke, flames and airbursting shrapnel.

Kroeger heard the long bray of an autocannon, its shells raking left and right wherever Iron Warriors clustered in groups of three or four. A long-barrelled melta-lance immolated a cluster of boulders with an ear-splitting screech of burned air, and individual blasts of lascannon fire hailed down like neon comets as they stabbed from narrow-gauge focusing muzzles.

Khamer went down, his chest a fused ruin of exposed bone where his innards had instantaneously cooked to superheated vapour, and Tumak was cut in two by a sawing blast of shell-fire. Ulgolan was hurled to the ground by a sudden growth of silicate stone that pummelled him from his climb. Another extrusion burst from a repairing gash in the wall, a barbed skewer that impaled Purdox like a corpse on a gibbet. An overhang grew above Straba, forcing him into the sheeting fire of a lascannon that sliced him in two.

Others fell, warriors whose names he didn't care to know and never would.

Anger doused him at the thought of a single company of Imperial Fists and a few thousand mortal soldiers keeping them out, and he pressed himself to the wall as the storm of fire from above intensified. This was always the bloodiest part in any assault, the moment where the true worth of a warrior was measured, the last fifty metres in the open. A commander could have all the planet-killing weapons at his disposal, the most sophisticated fortress, the most advanced countermeasures, but he still needed men of flesh and blood to cross that last scrap of open ground to get to grips with the enemy.

Warsmiths like Forrix and Toramino viewed this stage of a battle with distaste, as an unpleasant necessity within the gracefully choreographed sophistication of fire plans, bombardment schedules, approach saps, parallels and line upon line of perfectly angled siegeworks. Warsmith Harkor was an Olympian of the old ways, a warrior who knew the value of occasionally strengthening the mettle of his subordinates by plunging them into the fire and beating them upon the anvil of war.

Kroeger had little taste for the logistical mechanics of a siege, though he was competent enough in their execution. Better to let others do the digging, the planning and the building. His home was in the thick of battle, where boldness was a virtue and fury a killing edge.

Warriors emerged from the hellstorm of explosions and scything fragments,

searching for handholds beside him. They followed his example, knowing that where Kroeger led, the blood of the enemy was sure to flow. Fire and noise burst around him as he climbed higher and grenade dumpers ejected their payloads in tumbling cascades, but the enemy was running low on explosive ordnance and there were too few to do any real harm. Shrapnel whickered through the ranks of the Iron Warriors, but encased within layers of ceramite warplate, only a handful were blooded.

Vannuk climbed next to him, his burnished armour pitted with small arms impacts, and his helmet scored with heat burns. He had his bolter in one hand and loosed a short burst of fire. A scream, and a torn-up body fell from the wall.

'First blood to me,' grunted Vannuk.

Kroeger's bolter was still mag-locked to his thigh, and would likely stay there until he'd reached the rampart above.

'Who cares about *first* blood?' said Kroeger. 'So long as there's blood.'

Vannuk paused to take aim at another target, but Kroeger felt the wall beneath him tremble with substrate activity and punched his fist into a crack in the wall. He spread the fingers of his gauntlet to support his weight and swung out to grip a handhold over to his left as the wall ripped open in a leering slice, like the maw of an ambush predator. Vannuk barely had time to scream before he was swallowed. Oozing tendrils of liquid rock webbed the gap in an instant, drawing the seams of the wall closed again.

'Idiot,' was all Kroeger had to say on Vannuk's demise, and pushed himself onwards.

He climbed with random leaps and surging effort, evading spikes of glistening rock and hails of gunfire with a mix of skill and luck. A turret slid down the wall in flames where he had been climbing only a moment before. The mangled wreckage trailed its cybernetic crewman on ropes of cabling before slamming into the rock below. Its armoured panels tore open as it exploded. Flames belched, and corkscrewing contrails ripped in all directions as its shell hopper cooked off.

A shell burst hit the wall next to him, and Kroeger flinched as the impact caused his visor to darken momentarily. He looked up to see a long line of frightened faces looking down at him and grinned. They feared him and they were right to.

'Death is coming for you!' he yelled at them. 'This iron without will soon be iron within!'

Sporadic blasts of fire beat on his armour, a mixture of lasfire and solid

rounds. The shots spanked from his pauldrons, but didn't penetrate. Kroeger reached down and freed his bolter from his thigh. He swung the weapon to bear and squeezed off a three-round burst of shells.

One man's head simply vanished, the impact trauma enough to tear his skull from his spine. Another soldier exploded from the chest up as Kroeger's round detected enough mass to trigger the warhead's detonation. The third man fell back screaming, his face torn up by bone shrapnel from the dead men beside him. It was wasteful to expend mass-reactives on mortals, but the sheer mess it made of their fragile bodies was too satisfying to ignore. Clamping his bolter back to his thigh, Kroeger hauled himself up, hand over hand, grinning beneath his iron visor as he saw the chewed-up battlements within reach. The wall's integral defences were dead here, and now there was nothing to stop him.

He took hold of a twisted length of protruding rebar and hauled himself up, rolling over the broken-toothed remains of the wall. Shell fragments were embedded in the stone, and even as he dropped to the rampart, he had his bolter unclamped again and was searching for targets.

Only two Iron Warriors came over the wall with him: Vortrax and Ushtor, from the patterns on their helms and shoulder guards. Kroeger saw an Imperial Fists warrior turn towards them, a captain by the look of him. His face registered surprise, and he shouted a warning to another two Fists squatting in the midst of a company-strength of frightened mortals.

'No helmet?' hissed Kroeger, aiming and firing in one fluid motion. 'Stupid.'

The captain went down, but Kroeger was irritated to see that his shot had merely grazed him. The other Imperial Fists rose to his defence, moving apart and firing at their attackers. The mortal soldiers loosed panicked shots at random.

Vortrax fell back against the ruined wall, his breastplate hammered by concentrated bolter fire. Spasming detonations and a crack of mashed bones told Kroeger he had been pulped inside his armour.

Ushtor traded shots with the Fists, but these warriors were too cool under fire to be caught out by such undisciplined salvoes. Kroeger took his time and pulled his gun hard into his shoulder. He sighted on the leftmost of the Imperial Fists and put two carefully placed shots though his helm. The warrior dropped instantly, the back of his head a hollowed out shell of dripping brain matter and scorched bone.

Where the mortal soldiers had turned their attention to the fighting on the ramparts, two Iron Warriors gained the wall. Bolter fire hammered the mortal

soldiers, ripping arms from shoulders, torsos from legs like bodies caught in the flailing blades of a threshing machine. Their screams were pitiful, and Kroeger took little satisfaction in their meaningless deaths.

The Fists were the true prize here.

The fallen captain rose with a bared sword that blazed with golden light as he leapt towards the two Iron Warriors. First one, then the second died, carved up with powerful strokes aimed at the weakest points of their armour. The captain kicked them from the wall and turned to face Kroeger.

'Come at me and die, traitors!' he yelled, his face a mask of blood from where Kroeger's shot had torn a finger-deep furrow in his skull. Kroeger shook his head and shot him twice in the chest.

Beside him, Ushtor collapsed, his armour blown outwards by the force of shell detonations. Kroeger ignored the dying warrior's grunts of pain and loped towards the Imperial Fist who'd killed him.

Another warrior without a helm. Did Dorn's weakling sons *want* their heads blown off?

The Fist backed away, ejecting his bolter's magazine and slamming home a fresh clip.

'Nowhere to run,' said Kroeger.

'I'm not running,' answered the Imperial Fist. 'I'm waiting.'

Despite himself, Kroeger's curiosity was aroused. 'Waiting for what?'

'For them,' said the Fist.

Hammering impacts spun Kroeger round, and he felt the pain of lacerating wounds punched in his side. He dropped to one knee, seeing at least two dozen Imperial Fists charging towards him. They fired from the hip, but suffered no loss in accuracy. Two more shells struck him before he could scramble to cover: one in the shoulder, one in the centre of his chest. Warning icons flashed to life on his visor, and he coughed a wad of blood through the vox-grille of his helmet.

Kroeger fought to get off a last volley, but his arm hung uselessly at his side and his bolter lay in pieces before him. He hadn't even realised he'd lost the weapon. He looked over the edge of the wall, seeing only a handful of Iron Warriors clambering towards the rampart. Hundreds of mortal soldiers opposed them with explosives and massed fire. There would be no help from that quarter for now.

How demeaning to be kept out of a fortress by such dross.

Kroeger stared down at the dark blood pooling in front of him, its bright gleam and iron tang curiously pleasant even as it leaked from his numerous wounds.

A cold shadow fell across the bloodied ramparts, and a roaring blast of jet-hot air blasted downwards from screaming retros. Kroeger's spilled blood boiled in the heat and mortals screamed as their uniforms erupted in flames. The Imperial Fist with whom he'd traded words fell as the ammunition in his bolter exploded and transformed his wrists into charred stumps of flesh and nubs of fused bone.

Something fell from the sky, monstrous and cold.

It landed in the heart of the citadel with the booming clang of a funeral bell – the Olympian master of battle, a demigod in burnished warplate, a hammer-wielding avatar of thunder.

Perturabo, the Lord of Iron.

With the arrival of the primarch, the battle was over.

The outcome of the siege, never in doubt, was finally decided by his indomitable presence.

Perturabo came to rest on bended knee, one arm angled before him as though swearing homage to an unseen master, the other extended from his body. In the outstretched hand, he held a hammer the length of a mortal man, its haft fashioned from an alloy that was as unbreakable as it was unknown, patterned like marble, veined with lightning and capped by an amber pommel stone set with a slitted eye of jet. The head of the hammer was steel and gold, its rear razor-spiked, the killing face flat and murderous.

This gift from the Warmaster himself was no hammer for smithing, no tool of the forge and no symbol of unity.

Forgebreaker was a killing weapon, an instrument of death and nothing more.

A mantle of interlocking steel leaves draped from Perturabo's broad shoulders like the hide of some great silver-scaled dragon, and the primarch's raised gorget threw a ruddy light across his chiselled features. Eyes of the coldest blue, like ice-burned steel, glittered in the half-light of the day, and his scalp was shaven bare, pierced and threaded with dreadlocks of tightly wound cabling.

The Imperial Fists who'd come to kill Kroeger, seeing this most sublime chance to wreak harm on the personification of their hate, ignored his blood-wracked frame and took the only chance they would ever get to attack an enemy primarch. Kroeger had marched with his Legion since the great muster at the columned glory of the tyrant's palace, but he could count on one hand the times he had been privileged to witness his primarch make war.

Each time had been from a distance, and always it had been war made at range.

This marked the first time he had seen the Lord of Iron kill in person. It was a moment he would never forget.

Perturabo slew the first Imperial Fist before Kroeger was even aware he'd moved, spinning on his heel and letting the hammer slip through his grasp until he was holding it at its farthest extension. The killing face struck the first warrior, obliterating him in an explosion of meat and bone and shattered plate. Perturabo's silver cloak sliced out, its razor-edged scales cutting through the armour of a second warrior and leaving his shorn halves bisected so cleanly that it looked to Kroeger as though they could be put back together without effort.

A third warrior managed to reach striking distance, but never got the chance to even raise his weapon. The Lord of Iron extended his right fist and a storm of lightning-shot muzzle flare stabbed through the Imperial Fist. A dozen or more shells detonated virtually simultaneously, tearing him apart as surely as if a demolition charge had exploded within his chest cavity. What little flesh and blood remained of Dorn's warrior fell to the ground in a sticky red rain.

And then the Iron Circle slammed down around Perturabo.

Six hulking figures in heavy plates of gleaming iron and gold, each one breaking the ground apart with the force of an artillery strike. They straightened with a whine of pneumatics and a flicker of target acquisition protocols. The Colossus battle robots formed up on Perturabo, raising heavy siege hammers and monstrously oversized storm shields as their combat wetware took the measure of the foes arrayed before their master.

Gunfire streaked towards Perturabo, but the Iron Circle braced themselves in an impregnable shieldwall of iron, each shot deflected or ablated. The shields parted and Perturabo charged into the mass of Imperial Fists, his hammer looping around his body in deadly arcs, smashing armour, breaking bodies, crushing skulls, lopping limbs and ending lives. The Iron Circle advanced at his side, their siege hammers hurling shattered bodies from the walls with the force of their swings. They bludgeoned enemy warriors into the stonework, protecting Perturabo's flanks as *Forgebreaker* battered the Fists into boneless pieces and his gauntlet-mounted bolters tore the remains to shreds.

Death surrounded the Lord of Iron and he was its messenger.

Kroeger forced air into his lungs in short, awed breaths as the last Imperial Fist died. *Forgebreaker* smashed into the stone of the rampart, gouging a crater like the aftermath of a high-explosive bunker killer. Powdered rock-dust billowed around Perturabo, settling on the plates of his armour like flakes of windblown snow.

Almost thirty Space Marines dead in the span of five heartbeats.

The blood leaking from Kroeger's ravaged body was already sluggish, his flesh hot to the touch with the healing mechanisms of his post-human biology. He pushed himself to one knee and bowed his head as he felt Perturabo's gaze turn his way. Heavy footfalls approached and the sticky edge of the primarch's hammer touched the underside of his helmet. Gentle pressure lifted Kroeger's head, and he looked up into his primarch's eyes, the black, oversized pupils reflecting the crimson light of his gorget. Kroeger trembled beneath Perturabo's gaze, but it seemed the primarch's wrath had been spent on the Imperial Fists.

'Remove your helmet,' commanded the primarch, his voice like glaciers grinding together.

Kroeger nodded and reached up with his good arm, undoing the seal on one side. It wasn't easy to undo the other, but the catch eventually released with a hiss of pressure equalisation. He lifted his helmet clear, blinking as he adjusted to seeing the world without the filtering effects of his enhanced optics. The air here was warm and heavy with dust, scented with a metallic tint of the ferrous deposits beneath the surface and the sheer amount of blood spilled over the stone of the citadel's ramparts.

Perturabo in battle against the sons of Dorn

A halo danced around Perturabo's head, motes of dust and powdered stone caught in the ionising energies of his cranial interfaces. His features were pale and waxen, bleached of colour after months of seclusion, but the low sun was already triggering melanin production and imparting a leathery texture to his skin.

'You are Kroeger, aren't you?' said Perturabo.

For a terrifying moment, Kroeger couldn't think of his own name, but the primarch's question was purely rhetorical.

'I remember you from Isstvan,' continued Perturabo, speaking as though each word was begrudged. 'You're one of Harkor's brawlers, an attack dog with a taste for blood.'

Kroeger didn't know if that was praise or censure, and kept silent as Perturabo turned away, surveying the human wreckage of the bastion. The Iron Circle moved in perfect unison with the primarch, their shields held at their sides and their hammers hissing as spilled blood burned in the energy fields surrounding them.

Each automaton bore the heraldry of a Legion warrior, and their cold machine hearts were as loyal as it was possible to be. Perturabo had formed the Iron Circle in the wake of the attack on the *Iron Blood*; a self-sustaining unit of implacable killers, devoted servants and incorruptible praetorians all in one.

Kroeger winced as his injured arm flared with pain, and he curled his fingers into a fist. He heard the sounds of marching feet, bolter fire, iron on stone and the whine of aircraft engines from all directions. Clearly there was still some resistance left within the walls of the citadel, but the heart of it had been ripped out by Perturabo's unexpected appearance. Kroeger turned his face to the sky, seeing a circling Stormbird with its rear assault ramp lowered. It gleamed silver steel, gold and black, its flanks buttressed and armed with racks of missiles and multiple sponson-banks of heavy bolters.

This was Perturabo's latest transport, a heavy assault lander capable of carrying the Iron Circle while making an attack run into a hot landing zone with a high probability of making it out again. Where his brother primarchs liked to embellish their personal flyers with ornamentation and heroic names, Perturabo indulged in no such displays of ego-vanity.

Such craft were for battle and as one was destroyed another would be built.

'Where is your warsmith?' asked Perturabo, dragging Kroeger's thoughts back

to earth.

Kroeger spat a mouthful of blood-gummed dust before answering. ‘Triarch Harkor is with the guns, my lord. I expect he is on his way here now.’

‘No doubt,’ answered Perturabo, looking closely at him, as though seeing him from the first time. ‘You alone survived to reach the rampart?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Kroeger, seeing no need to mention Vortrax and Ushtor. If there was glory to be had, where was the sense in spreading it around?

‘Stand,’ said Perturabo.

Kroeger obeyed instantly, his body protesting at the interruption of its healing cycles.

Perturabo regarded him strangely, as though searching for something he couldn’t name, but which he sensed was there, hiding just out of sight like a seed in fertile soil, nourished though not yet ready to bloom.

‘Interesting,’ he said, leaving Kroeger to wonder what he meant.

Kroeger heard scaling ladders slamming against the walls and the screech of pneumatic lifters. Whatever protocols had empowered the defences appeared to have run their course with the death of the Imperial Fists, and it wasn’t long before Iron Warriors were clambering over the shot-blasted ramparts as victors instead of attackers.

A number of lightweight Thunderhawks screamed down to the hardpan of the interior precincts of the citadel as though making a combat drop. Assault ramps slammed down and the bulky forms of numerous Iron Warriors warsmiths emerged. Kroeger averted his eyes as he saw Warsmith Harkor marching towards him alongside Lord Forrix.

Harkor’s fellow triarch went bareheaded, and his vulcanised cowl was pulled back over his shaven scalp. Ribbed neural connectors lay flat across his skull like the woven braids of a feral world savage. Emerging from the same Thunderhawk as Lord Forrix came the towering figure of Warsmith Falk. Though his armour was superficially identical to that worn by Forrix, he was half a head taller, his physique the greatest among the Iron Warriors.

Last to emerge from his flyer was Toramino, master of the Stor-bezashk. Where the other warsmiths favoured the bulky protection of Cataphractii armour, Toramino was clad in a suit of burnished Mark IV Maximus plate. And where his fellow warriors were grimy and coated with a patina of this valley’s omnipresent red dust, Toramino’s armour was polished to a mirror finish, as though freshly unveiled by its creator in the Martian forges. A cloak of black mail cascaded from his shoulders like an oil spill, contrasting with the stark

white of his braided hair.

The warsmiths approached their primarch with a degree of caution, for it was said that his humours had become ever more volatile and unforgiving of late. The rumours of how Warsmith Berossus had come by his horrifying injuries were still rife, and Kroeger didn't envy them their exalted rank.

The warsmiths arranged themselves before the primarch, each dropping to one knee and hammering their right fist into their left palm.

'From iron cometh strength,' they said.

Perturabo stood *Forgebreaker*'s pommel on the broken stone of the ground, leaning forwards to rest his arms on its wide head. The gesture was intended to look relaxed, but Kroeger saw the simmering tension in the primarch's body, like a taut cable at the very limit of its tensile strength.

Yes, he decided, better a foot soldier than a leader.

Forrix was not fooled by the apparent ease of their primarch. Though it had been many weeks since he had last laid eyes on Perturabo, he saw through the crack in the presented facade to the angry core within. Their lord was not a warrior who dealt with his subordinates with the easy familiarity some of the primarchs were said to enjoy. He glanced over at Harkor, his fellow triarch's sycophantic features brimming with pride.

The Cadmean Citadel had fallen, and it appeared that Harkor's Grand Battalion had been the one to finally break the Imperial Fists defences. Harkor's thoughts would be turning to the honour that must surely accompany such an achievement, but Forrix saw this moment through a different lens.

Since Isstvan, Perturabo had become a giant of terrible rages and spontaneous violence, and Harkor was gambling that this humbling of Dorn's sons would quench that molten anger. Yet as the silence between primarch and warsmiths stretched, even Harkor's certainty of approbation began to falter. Only the creak of armour, the sigh of the suddenly quiescent wind, and the metallic rustling of the primarch's cloak disturbed the emptiness.

'I was specific in my orders, was I not?' said Perturabo at last, slipping *Forgebreaker* back into its shoulder harness.

There could be only one warsmith intended to answer such a question, and Harkor rose to his feet, uncertainty making him an orphan amongst his peers.

'My lord, I–' was all he managed before Perturabo's gauntlet took hold of his gorget and hauled him into the air. Though Harkor was encased in the heaviest battle-plate of the Legiones Astartes, Perturabo lifted him without difficulty until

he was face to face with the steel blue of the primarch's cold gaze.

'Does Triarch Harkor now command the Iron Warriors?'

'No, my lord,' gasped Harkor. 'You and you alone are master of Olympia's sons.'

'I see,' said Perturabo, as if mulling this over. 'And is Triarch Harkor aware of this?'

The choking warsmith nodded, his throat too constricted for words. A welded seam separated from the plastron and machined rivets snapped from their housing on the gorget. The power to crush such unbreakable plates was beyond imagining.

'And yet he thinks to ignore my orders and devise stratagems of his own,' said Perturabo. 'An interesting interpretation of the chain of command, don't you think?'

Harkor drew a breath as Perturabo's grip loosened a fraction.

'My lord, I saw an opportunity,' he said between wheezing gasps. 'A chance for victory.'

Perturabo nodded, as though he had known this all along, but did not release Harkor or lower him back to the ground.

'Victory?'

'The fortress is yours, my lord.'

'Not through any design of Triarch Harkor,' snapped Perturabo, turning towards the bloodied warrior standing behind him. Forrix didn't recognise him, but he had the look of a killer, the kind of bare-knuckle brawler you'd want at your side in the hellstorm of a breach or the close-quarters bloodbath of a boarding action.

Perturabo dropped Harkor, and gestured to the warrior to step forwards.

'This is Kroeger, and he is all your grand plan saw to the ramparts alive,' said the primarch, gripping the cratered curves of the warrior's shoulder guards. 'The lives of fighting men were wasted while you watched from a gun battery below. I expect more from my warsmiths, Harkor, especially one of the Trident. I expect discipline and loyalty, but most of all I expect an unbending obedience to the orders I have given.'

Forrix awaited the blow that would crush the life from Harkor, the way it had been mashed out of Berossus, but it never came. Instead, Perturabo reached out and took hold of Harkor's shoulder guard with his left hand. With his right, he ripped the plastron from Harkor's chest with a single wrenching tear. Sparks, cables and electro-conductive fluids drizzled from the damage. The breastplate

clanged to the ground, but Perturabo wasn't done.

Piece by piece, the primarch tore Harkor's armour from his body, dropping the sundered plates at his feet like shed skin. Every component was ungently removed until Harkor stood, much reduced, in his torn bodyglove, with ruptured connector tubes and lank ropes of chem-shunts dangling where they had snapped.

'You are unfit to wear this armour, Harkor,' said Perturabo. 'From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron. You have shown that you possess none of these qualities. You are the rust that eats at the metal, a failed cog that must be removed from the body of the machine before its damage spreads.'

'My lord, please–' began Harkor, but an icy glare from the primarch withered his tongue.

'From this moment you are no longer a triarch,' said Perturabo. 'Each blade of the Trident needs to be as solid and unbending as the hand that wields it, and you are weak, Harkor.'

Harkor shook his head in mute denial as his world crashed down around him, and Forrix couldn't help a small smile tugging at the corner of his thin lips. He had never believed Harkor worthy of a place in the Trident, but had wisely kept his opinion to himself.

'You are stripped of all rank, and are now simply a warrior of the 23rd Grand Battalion,' said Perturabo. 'You will stand in the fighting ranks, a battle-brother like any other. Get out of my sight, you are dismissed.'

Harkor blanched at this terrible punishment, and Forrix wondered if he might attack Perturabo in his despair, but it seemed the disgraced triarch lacked even the spine for that final escape from shame. Harkor turned and marched away, a broken man whose every hope and dream of ambition had been crushed forever.

Perturabo returned his attention to his senior warsmiths, each one now smelling the sickly scent of opportunity. With Golg dead at Phall and Harkor disgraced, Forrix felt the strength of Toramino and Falk's ambition.

'It seems my Trident is *two* members short,' said Perturabo, loosing a breath that looked like it had been held in his lungs for years. And with that exhalation, a burden seemed to lift from the primarch, as though the mordancy that had settled upon him after killing the boarders on the *Iron Blood* went with it.

Forrix rose to his feet, knowing that their obeisance was done.

'We are ready to serve,' said Barban Falk, standing with the rest of the warsmiths.

‘I am your humble servant, my lord,’ added Toramino. ‘Honoured veteran, proud son and trusted warrior.’

Perturabo smiled his mortician’s smile and said, ‘The Phoenician and his army of debauchers will be making planetfall within hours, and I need the Trident at my side when he comes. Forrix, who would you suggest as suitable replacements for your fallen comrades?’

Forrix had been waiting for this, and though there were many warsmiths in the IV Legion, only a very few had the will required to stand alongside the primarch. Dargron had perished in the last violent spasms of Phall and the primarch had despatched Varrek and his Grand Battalion to destinations unknown in the wake of that battle. Both had been groomed to be future triarchs, but Forrix knew what answer was required of him at this moment.

‘Warsmiths Toramino and Falk would make fine warriors of the Trident,’ said Forrix. ‘You wish strength and power at your side, and both possess such qualities in abundance.’

Perturabo nodded as though considering this answer.

‘On any other day I would have agreed with you wholeheartedly, Forrix,’ he said, looking to the sky with a throaty chuckle. ‘But today is not a day like any other.’

Forrix was unsure of the primarch’s meaning, and kept silent as Perturabo stood before Barban Falk and placed his hands upon his head in benediction. Though huge, even by Legiones Astartes standards, Falk was dwarfed by Perturabo’s bulk.

‘Barban Falk, you will become one of my triarchs,’ said Perturabo, and Falk hammered his fist into his palm once again. But if Toramino expected the same honour, his hopes of elevation were dashed by the primarch’s next words.

‘Toramino, you are a fine warsmith, but no one commands the Stor-bezashk like you,’ said Perturabo. ‘I want new blood in the Trident, a fresh voice to shake the dust from our complacency.’

‘My lord?’ said Toramino, his disbelief plain. ‘I do not understand…’

The primarch hauled to his side the bloody warrior who’d fought his way over the walls.

‘Kroeger will take command of the 23rd Grand Battalion,’ said Perturabo. ‘He will be the third blade of my Trident.’

THREE

New Blood

Cavea Ferrum

Sanctum

Perturabo decreed that they descend the mountain on foot, trudging through the broken flesh and burnt metal remains of Harkor's abortive assault. It was an unsubtle message, but the Lord of Iron wasn't known for his delicate ways. Yet, Forrix reminded himself, a lack of subtlety did not equate to the simplistic. Decades of war spent in blood-filled trenches and shell-stormed breaches had worn the sharper edges of Perturabo's wit and sophistication blunt, but the alchemically wrought intellect behind the primarch's sapphire gaze was not to be underestimated.

The primarch marched ahead of them, ringed by the heavy shields of the Iron Circle. His pace was unhurried; he wanted them to see the ruin of Harkor's Grand Battalion, the thoroughness with which the escalade had been gutted by the Imperial Fists, and the price of disobedience. Compared to Berossus, Harkor had got off lightly. Was that a growing sign that Perturabo had emerged from the deep well of black thoughts that had shrouded him of late?

Forrix walked with Falk and Kroeger, the newest triarch yet to break his stunned silence following his elevation to the Trident. Toramino walked behind them, wreathed in bitter frustration and excluded from their presence by Perturabo's unexpected promotion of Harkor's warrior. If Kroeger felt the daggers the humiliated warsmith was plunging into his back with every glance, he was doing an admirable job of ignoring them.

The silent walk downhill hadn't yet changed Forrix's opinion of Kroeger; the man's broken-boned face told him all he needed to know. Kroeger was a dulled weapon, a tool to be wielded by his betters. Had it been an act of wilfulness on Perturabo's part to make him one of the Trident, or had his talent for recognising raw, malleable potential seen something in Kroeger beyond his brutality? Best to

step warily around this one then, until his worth could be gauged.

Pioneer crews passed them on their way uphill, followed by cadres of black-robed tech-priests and their walking, crawling and floating palanquins. Outlandish beyond any sane requirements of function, they were abhorrent monstrous things, bulbous, many-limbed and empowered by uncounted forms of locomotion.

'Vultures picking upon a corpse,' said Falk with distaste.

'The Pneumachina?' asked Forrix.

'Is that what they're calling themselves now?'

'So I hear,' said Forrix, watching as a heavy, segmented construction engine moved uphill on tracked cog-wheels with a rippling peristaltic motion. Oil-slathered slaves crawled behind it, their emaciated bodies pierced with metallic ribbons imprinted with black and white lines of variegated thickness. Hooded adepts wearing smoke-belching backpacks that reeked of embalming fluids and curdled lubricants lashed the slaves with barbed flails, reciting nonsense numbers and atonal braying vocalisations.

'Well, whatever they are now, it's unseemly to desecrate a place like this.'

'Desecrate?' said Forrix with an indulgent chuckle. 'This isn't a sacred place, it's a fortress of stone and steel, walls and bastions. Worse, it's a ruined one.'

'For now,' said Falk. 'When we're done with Horus's rebellion, I'll return to rebuild it.'

'It's your rebellion too, warsmith,' said Kroeger.

'What did you say?' said Falk.

'I said it's *your* rebellion too,' repeated Kroeger.

Falk's eyes narrowed, the blackness of his pupils expanding as he tried to read the subtext of Kroeger's words. Forrix had to give it to Kroeger – voicing a dissenting opinion before a warsmith was a virtually certain route to death, either on the end of a power fist or in a swift reassignment to a forlorn hope.

'And what did you *mean* by what you said?' pressed Falk.

Kroeger frowned, as though confused by the question. Forrix realised it wasn't that he didn't understand Falk, simply that there was no guile to his words, only unvarnished truth.

'The Warmaster's cause is our cause,' said Kroeger. 'We fight as one or we will be defeated.'

Forrix laughed, the sound echoing from the blasted rocks of the mountain. 'I think I see now why the primarch wanted you in the Trident,' he said.

'You do?' said Falk. 'Then you're a better judge of character than me.'

‘Kroeger here is a plain speaker,’ said Forrix. ‘Aren’t you?’

Kroeger shrugged. ‘I speak as I find, warsmith.’

‘There are no ranks within the Trident,’ said Forrix. ‘When we three are assembled, I am simply Forrix. You are simply Kroeger.’

Forrix jerked a thumb at the towering Falk. ‘But he’s still Warsmith Falk. Even to me.’

Kroeger nodded, ignoring Forrix’s attempt to defuse the tension, and said, ‘So am I a warsmith now?’

Forrix hadn’t thought of that. ‘Perturabo gave you Harkor’s Grand Battalion, so, yes, I suppose you are. Congratulations, Warsmith Kroeger.’

From the look on Kroeger’s face, Forrix might as well have handed him a chalice of graving acid and told him to drink every last drop.

‘I never thought to be a warsmith,’ said Kroeger. ‘It’s a rank that doesn’t suit my temperament.’

‘Then your temperament needs to change,’ said Falk.

Looking at the bloody streaks on Kroeger’s armour, Forrix wondered if that were possible.

Smoke fogged the lower reaches of the mountain promontory, propellant haze lying heavy on the metal-decked trench network like the noxious plague mists that attended the aftermath of a viral cleansing. Forrix watched the Stor-bezashk gun crews in reinforced artillery pits scrubbing out the scored barrels of the Thunderstrike artillery pieces, while bulky ogryn-servitors loaded unfired shells onto armoured leviathans for their return to the deep-storage magazines.

He passed slaves captured en route to this world toiling alongside servitors to shore up damaged portions of the circumvallation. With the fall of the citadel such efforts were largely redundant, but the whips of the discipline masters fell just as regularly and just as harshly. They lost Toramino somewhere near the gun batteries, and Forrix could already imagine the bile and venom spilling from his patrician lips.

Their route cut a zigzagging path through the siegeworks, each turn of the trench perfectly calculated to keep the warriors within sheltered from plunging fire. More like deep caissons for some undersea dig than mere trenches, their sides were high and sheathed in shock-resistant plates laced into the very bedrock. Blast-shielded shutters led down to the hardened redoubts that housed the Selucid Thorakite regiments. Natural-born Olympian soldiers who had joined with the Iron Warriors in the genocide of their homeworld, the Thorakitai were

grim-faced men and women in faded khaki, scaled breastplates and helms fashioned in the image of a Mark IV suit. Their equipment was scoured a dull ochre by the omnipresent dust, but the firing mechanisms were protected in cloth wrappings, the focus rings in scratch-resistant foil.

Everyone Forrix saw was kneeling, for word of Perturabo's coming had raced ahead of them with the speed of a rumour. Whatever industry was afoot in the trench network halted at the sight of Perturabo and his Iron Circle, but the primarch paid his devotees no mind, and the warriors behind him took his lead. Slaves abased themselves in the mud, the Thorakitai stood with rifles held across their chests and Iron Warriors hammered their fists into their palms.

Iron-skull standards and black banners bearing the amber Eye of Horus were unfurled as confirmation of the citadel's fall spread throughout the surrounding army. Kroeger's simple words returned to Forrix as he felt a tremor of unease at the sight of Horus Lupercal's banners raised higher than the Legion standards. Trust was a hard-earned commodity within the Iron Warriors, and Forrix took a moment to wonder how the Warmaster's commands would differ from those of the Emperor.

The cheering started slowly, for none in Perturabo's Legion, whether mortal or post-human, were given to overt displays of emotion, but soon the bellowing roars of victory were ringing from one side of the valley to the other. Tales of how the primarch himself and his robot praetorians had ended the siege were already spreading and magnifying the farther they spread. Perturabo ignored the cheers as he ignored the abasement of his followers, marching now with purpose and direction towards his personal bunker complex.

The route to its sunken entrance was circuitous and fraught with peril, threading a tightrope-thin path through coiled banks of layered razorwire, constantly shifting minefields, conversion beam traps, las-nets, graviton crush-pits and melta-lined ditches. Even supplicants approached Perturabo's inner sanctum as attackers must, and Forrix felt his skin crawl as the targeting optics of dozens of killing weapons tracked him towards the entrance.

Its heavy blast gates eased open on pneumatic hinges, unbreakable adamantium housed in tens of metres of kinetic-absorbent permacrete. Their outer faces were sheathed in beaten gold and silver murals taken from the sundered gates of the Palace of Lochos.

Guilt touched Forrix as he remembered the assault up the Kephalan Hill towards the last refuge of the self-appointed tyrant of Olympia, fighting through fortifications incorporated into the palace by a youthful Perturabo. Defences that

would have been virtually impregnable with Iron Warriors defending them were overcome in days, but the cost of that victory had ripped a terrible wound in the Legion's soul.

One from which it had yet to recover, thought Forrix.

Hard on the heels of that thought came another.

Could they *ever* recover from the atrocities wrought on Olympia?

The gates opened to the extent of their width, and the gold murals flattened by Perturabo's assault were swept from sight. Forrix let out his breath, glancing left and right to see if his fellow triarchs were similarly affected by the reminder of their lost homeworld. Falk and Kroeger were keeping a tight rein on their emotions. Neither had set foot in Perturabo's inner sanctum before this moment, and both warriors were eager not to let their awe show.

Of the two, Falk was doing the better job. Kroeger's head craned back as they descended a widening ramp that led into the shadowed depths of the bunker. At the foot of the ramp was a semicircular arch of latticed ironwork, beyond which lay only shadows and the ambient glow of flickering electro-flambeaux.

'Where are the defences?' asked Kroeger, unable to keep silent any longer.

'Defences?' said Perturabo, finally turning to speak to his warriors. The Iron Circle stood behind him, shields locked together in an unbreakable wall. 'What defences do I need when I have the Iron Circle and the Trident?'

'I just expected more,' said Kroeger. 'Defence turrets. More guards. Traps.'

Perturabo grunted in amusement. 'I like you, Kroeger. You are a simple man. You have none of the mistrust and scheming that touches most of the warriors who want to be where you are.'

Forrix wondered if that had been a barb aimed at him, but chose to believe it was directed at warsmiths like Toramino or Varrek, men who sought to rise in prominence and glory for its own sake. Forrix had never sought this position to serve his own ambition, but for the good of his beloved Legion. He was not immodest enough to brag of his skills, but knew there were few in the Iron Warriors who understood the mechanics of war and the logistical necessities of a mobile fighting force as intimately as he did.

'I don't know why I'm here,' said Kroeger. 'As you said, I'm a brawler.'

'That is what you *were*,' said Perturabo. 'You are now a warsmith of the Iron Warriors, Kroeger. Start acting like one.'

So chastened, Kroeger pulled himself more erect. Perturabo turned and marched onwards, the Iron Circle parting to allow him into their midst before moving off in perfect lockstep. Forrix and his fellow triarchs followed the

booming footsteps of the armoured robots, plunging into the flickering light of the *Cavea Ferrum*.

‘You wanted to know where the defences are?’ said Forrix as they passed beneath the ironwork archway. ‘This is it.’

Perturabo had designed the labyrinth of the *Cavea Ferrum* from a set of crumbling plans he had discovered a century and a half ago in the secret compartment of a tribal cremation pit of the Sabellian peoples of Old Earth. Perturabo had recognised the work as that of his beloved Firenzii polymath and instantly encased it in the preserving mechanism of a stasis field. That such a document could have survived the passage of tens of thousands of years was miraculous, but no less miraculous was how Perturabo had known a document so out of time with its final resting place had come to end up there.

Even then, newly reunited with his father, Perturabo had an affinity with earth and stone.

Had that been when the Emperor had chosen to yoke him to a singular purpose?

The walls of the labyrinth were featureless and grey, modularly constructed to be identical and to facilitate its dismantling and storage between warzones. Every surface was utterly devoid of markings that might help any lost souls trapped in its convoluted depths. Though Perturabo denied it, Forrix was certain the routes chosen by any who walked its paths altered in the wake of their passage, such that it would be impossible to retrace any foolish steps that led to dead ends. Even the ensconced flambeaux seemed to burn with the same dancing pattern of flames, the same shadows and the same crackle of electro-chemical reactions.

Perturabo led them deeper and deeper into the labyrinth, taking turn after turn through its featureless walls, sometimes appearing to lead them back to its edges, sometimes winding closer to its secret heart. As he did every time he travelled the *Cavea Ferrum*, Forrix attempted to map the labyrinth in his mind, but within minutes he was hopelessly knotted in turns that should have been physically impossible and a route that owed nothing to the surety of Euclidian geometries.

‘This doesn’t make sense,’ muttered Falk, and Forrix knew he was encountering the same untenable convolutions in his mental cartography. ‘We’ve been down this passage before, I know we have. But that’s…’

‘Give up before you go mad,’ said Forrix. ‘I’ve tried scores of times to map this place, but I never manage more than a handful of turns before it all stops

making sense.’

‘How is it possible?’ asked Falk.

‘The genius of a long dead gentleman of Firenza,’ answered Perturabo, emerging from the unfolding shields of the Iron Circle. ‘A bastard son who changed the world with his works.’

‘He designed this labyrinth for you?’ asked Kroeger.

‘No, his death was tens of thousands of years ago on Terra, supposedly in the arms of his patron king,’ said Perturabo, turning on the spot to regard the blank walls of the impossible labyrinth. ‘After the Emperor first came to Olympia and brought me to Terra, I learned of the Firenzii and searched the ruins of Old Earth for copies of his surviving journals, gathering his hidden papers and learning of the works he pursued in private.’

‘Sounds more like something the Crimson King would be interested in,’ said Falk.

Perturabo nodded, the hint of a smile tugging at the edge of his lips. ‘Magnus and I spent many months together in search of buried secrets. It’s true, though it was the esoteric writings of the world’s former masters that most interested him. He cared more for the ancient philosophies of the lost civilisations than its mechanical wonders, but it was a heady time of exploration for us both.’

Forrix had heard the primarch speak of the dead genius before, and, as before, the retelling ignited a fierce desire to excavate the remains of forgotten civilisations with no thoughts of war, only exploration and the discovery of unknown histories. Forrix had once harboured ambition to dig the soil of Terra in search of the past glories swept away in the chaos of Old Night, but that dream was dead now. Only conquest would take them to Terra, and any digging would be to hack trenches into the earth, raise walls and bring to ruin what they had helped to craft.

‘The *Cavea Ferrum* was nothing more than an intellectual exercise for the Firenzii, but I saw how it could be turned to defensive purposes, its geometries used to lure an unwary enemy into a foolish assault, trapping them in a way that would allow no escape.’

‘It’s impressive,’ said Kroeger. ‘Are there any others like it?’

‘Yes, there is one other,’ said Perturabo, almost reluctantly.

Forrix hid his surprise. He had not known that Perturabo had crafted another such labyrinth, but in the frenetic aftermath of massacre of their brother Legions, there was much he did not know of his primarch’s activities.

‘Where is it?’ asked Falk. ‘On Isstvan V?’

‘No, it is not on Isstvan V, it is aboard a gaol-hulk belonging to my Eighth Legion brother,’ said Perturabo. ‘I built him an imitation of this labyrinth in which to have his sport with… a uniquely capable prisoner.’

‘Who?’ asked Forrix.

Perturabo ignored the question and set off into the daedalan complexities of the labyrinth once more, tracing a path that was at once nonsensical yet led inexorably towards its secret heart. Forrix kept his eye on the primarch’s back, wondering what manner of individual could possibly warrant the construction of such an elaborate place of captivity.

After a span of time that his armour’s chronometer could not conclusively measure, the quality of light in the tunnels of the labyrinth began to change. The flickering light gave way to the diffuse illumination of candles and Forrix knew they had arrived at their destination. A last turn, and they had reached the centre of the labyrinth.

Forrix had known what to expect, but the others had not, and he savoured the expressions of surprise that spread across their faces as they beheld the primarch’s inner sanctum. ‘Organised chaos’ was how Golg had described it, where Harkor’s term had been ‘shambolic’. Forrix knew better, seeing through the apparent haphazard placement of drawing boards, model-making apparatus, t-squares, stretching frames and reams and reams of rolled manuscripts to the order beneath.

This was no random accretion of scattered detritus that had built up over the centuries, but a precisely ordered collection of genius to rival any work of Magnus or Guilliman. Its dimensions were modest in comparison to the scale and complexity of the surrounding labyrinth, yet the vaulted space was still the equal of a good-sized manufactory. The walls were faced in crumbling stonework that looked to have been brought block by block from some sunken ruin, and rebuilt with painstaking attention to restoring its previous incarnation as faithfully as possible. Murals depicting what might have been great birds were inscribed on one wall, and a flaking mosaic of painted clay covered another in a wide rendering of a group of faded men and women clustered around a central figure whose head was haloed in golden light.

Faded paintings held in shimmering stasis fields hung on the walls, one showing a semi-clothed man in the desert with a lion at his feet, another an unfinished work of a seated woman and her child in the centre of a circle of admirers while a great temple was rebuilt against a backdrop of fighting horsemen.

Heavy tables were strewn throughout the space, each one awash in rolled parchments, set-squares, wooden protractors and measuring rods. The tools of the mathematician and the engineer lay side by side with those of the warrior, the general, the anatomist and the statesman. Immense drawing desks bore architectural plans for grand pavilions, magnificent amphitheatres, complex industrial infrastructures, vast hives of habitation, impregnable citadels and ornate palaces to rival that of the mountain fastness of the Emperor himself.

Peeter Egon Momus himself had wept at the sight of these drawings and begged Perturabo to allow him to make them a reality. No architect of Terra had ever envisaged structures of such grandeur, and no fantasy of design had thought to render such magical buildings into life. That they had sprung from the hand of the Lord of Iron should have surprised no one, but the idea that a being so mired in destruction was capable of sublime creation seemed beyond comprehension.

Nor was Perturabo's genius confined to the drawing board, for many of his tables and workbenches were home to hundreds of delicately wrought machines, trinkets and gewgaws of such fine construction that it seemed impossible one so huge had modelled them. A silver lyre in the shape of a horse's head, gilded eggs, fabulously wrought birdcages that would never again confine a living creature, and miniature war machines competed for space alongside automata of all shapes and description – animal, mechanical, human and alien. A miniature Warhound Titan stood tallest of the automata, and Forrix felt an odd shiver of brooding prescience at the red, black and yellow of its carapace armour.

It was a treasure trove of wonders, miraculous creations and the most ancient history of Old Earth preserved in a hermetically sealed environment. None beyond the warriors of the Trident knew of its existence, and that was just the way Perturabo liked it. After so long spent taking the metal to the stone, better to be thought the simple journeyman than reveal the soul of the craftsman within.

Perturabo sent the Iron Circle to a cleared corner of the chamber and moved through the creative disorder to a bronze-edged hololithic table that was, by its very ordinariness, the most unusual item in the collection. Its surface rippled with light, course vectors, geostationary anchor points and dotted trajectories. They formed a map of the heavens above this world, where a grand fleet of iron awaited Perturabo's order to break orbit and continue the prosecution of the Warmaster's campaigns.

This world was a spiteful diversion only, a chance to wreak harm on a Legion whose disdain was harshly earned and well deserved. Rogal Dorn's boasts of his Imperial Fists' superiority had brought the metal to the stone here, and the Iron

Warriors had taken great relish in humbling his golden Legion.

And in the aftermath of Phall, it was doubly satisfying to kill warriors of the VII Legion.

Perturabo scanned the display, and in the second before it flickered and changed to reveal a completely different world, Forrix saw that the parabolic image contained a great many more ships than they had brought with them. The Iron Warriors vessels were constant and motionless, while these new arrivals moved in dangerous proximity, describing sinuous arcs overhead.

'The Third Legion are here?' he asked.

'They are,' agreed Perturabo. 'But knowing my brother it will be many hours before his arrival will be as perfectly choreographed as he wants and he sends word of his coming.'

'Do we know yet why the Phoenician requested this meeting?' asked Falk.

'No,' replied Perturabo, his curiosity plain. 'Fulgrim has not yet deigned to reveal his purpose. Though he tells me it is wondrous.'

Forrix narrowed his eyes. 'Wondrous?'

'His words.'

'I guessed as much,' said Forrix, and Perturabo gave a wry grin.

'My brother always had a flair for the overdramatic, which only seems to have got worse since we threw in our lot with the Warmaster,' said Perturabo.

The Lord of Iron counted none of his fellow primarchs as close, but the Phoenician's adherence to perfection in all things had once provided common ground between the two super-warriors and allowed them to talk as trusted comrades-in-arms if not beloved brothers. What the Emperor's Children had sought with constant motion towards the attainment of perfection, the Iron Warriors earned with rigid discipline and methodical planning; two divergent paths to the same ultimate goal.

Perturabo brought up a fresh set of system schematics and warp corridor overlays, together with the latest immetereological projections for the emergent storm fronts. A red planet swam into focus, its surface almost entirely englobed by metallic growths like algal blooms of shimmering steel and toxic fumes.

'Mars?' asked Falk, leaning his elbows on the edge of the projection table with an ease that told Forrix he should have been brought into the Trident much earlier.

'It is, Falk, well spotted,' said Perturabo with a knowing look at Forrix. 'Horus will need the Martian theatre fully secured before we move against Terra, and I think Fulgrim is here to seek our aid in breaking open the forge temples. If I'm

right, then I want us to have a plan in place to achieve that objective.'

'We don't have orders of our own?' said Kroeger. 'We need to wait for Fulgrim's painted fools to tell us what to do?'

'We *had* our orders,' said Perturabo, his gravelled tones warning against pursuing any line of inquiry that led to Phall. 'Now we await new orders from the Warmaster. Until we receive those orders, I will humour Fulgrim and listen to what he has to say.'

Kroeger nodded in understanding and folded his arms, switching his gaze to the red planet's areography. Forrix let his eye rest a moment on Kroeger, wondering how long the primarch's tolerance for his newest triarch's plain speaking would last. If he didn't last, there were others who could easily take his place. Putting Kroeger from his thoughts, Forrix switched his gaze to the highlighted quadrangles of the Martian surface: manufactories, forge-temples and fortified industrial hinterlands that yet resisted the Mechanicum forces loyal to the Warmaster.

'They'll be tough to break open,' he said, studying the force disposition list and reading the contours of the fortified landscape surrounding the forges.

'They will,' agreed Perturabo. 'But they'll have to be taken sooner rather than later. The southern battle-forges of Arcadia and the Noctis Labyrinthus Line are still in enemy hands. If they're reinforced they could threaten the supply lines from the armouries of Mondus Gamma and Mondus Occulum.'

'You think the loyalists will try to retake the–' began Kroeger.

Perturabo's fist slammed down on the edge of the hololithic table, causing the veils of light representing the topography of Mars to shudder, and Kroeger flinched at the primarch's violence, unsure as to what insult he had given.

'Do not speak of "loyalists",' warned Perturabo. 'If we call them loyalists, what does that make us? They are the *enemy*. In this fight there is no such thing as a loyalist or a traitor, only victor and vanquished. Remember that.'

'I will, my lord. Apologies,' said Kroeger.

Perturabo nodded and the tension in his body evaporated. The primarch's anger was a volatile thing, quick to lash out, but just as quickly checked. The Lord of Iron spread the fingers of his bunched fist and, Kroeger's error forgotten, outlined the opening moves of a campaign against the Martian forges that was as audacious as it was formidable. No sooner had he begun to describe the investment of the Tharsis uplands around the Noctis Labyrinthus than a vox-warble intruded on his words.

He stabbed the edge of the table with an impatient digit and said, 'What?'

‘My lord, pardon the intrusion,’ said the bland tones of the Stonewrought, Soltarn Vull Bronn. ‘But the Emperor’s Children are here.’

‘I know,’ snapped Perturabo. ‘I see their ships capering in orbit.’

‘No, my lord,’ said the Stonewrought. ‘I mean they are *here*. On the planet’s surface. Now.’

Perturabo flinched as though struck, knowing it had been minutes only since the fleet of what had once been known as the 28th Expedition had achieved an orbit capable of launching trans-atmospheric craft.

‘Impossible,’ said Perturabo. ‘Fulgrim would never sanction a landing without hours of preparation. You must be mistaken.’

Even over the hiss and spit of the distorted vox, Forrix could hear Vull Bron’s wary hesitation at the thought of contradicting the primarch.

‘Over three hundred drop-craft have landed beyond the mouth of the valley, my lord,’ said Vull Bronn at last. ‘They bear the heraldry of the Third Legion, albeit obscured by fresh markings we cannot identify.’

‘Fulgrim is here?’ said Perturabo, as though unwilling to believe his own words.

Forrix realised his gene-father did not know his brother as well as he thought.

What other surprises might the Phoenician have in store?

FOUR

Severed

Carnivalia

Closer than Brothers

A truth that all living things must come to terms with at some point is that their life is finite, that the energy they draw from the universal reservoir will some day be taken back. It was a truth that Apothecary Fabius dismissed as a failure of imagination. Life was motive force like any other: like electricity, like warp-fire, and once absurd notions of morality and right and wrong were removed from the equation, the restoration of that motive force became simply a matter of biological engineering.

His laboratory aboard the *Andronicus* was a place of wonders and revelation, where the secrets of life and death, and the narrow spaces in between, were laid bare by the slice of his blade and exposed to his towering intellect. It was a labyrinthine warren of curving passageways, vaulted vivisectoria of cold iron and hermetically sealed chambers with armourglass portholes that looked into bedlams of grotesquerie.

Life had been made, reshaped and extinguished here. Experiments on living tissue, living beings and the ignoble dead had stocked the lair of Fabius with specimens of human, post-human and alien origin. Scavenging the battlefields of this newborn rebellion with his polished steel blades, he had accumulated an alchemist's treasure trove of the macabre, the holy and the divine. Progenoids cut from the flesh of the living and the dead of Isstvan V and Prismatica had furnished Fabius with the genetic master-key to seven of the Emperor's Legions, the code sequences that would form the basis of his ultimate revelation.

The secrets of the Emperor himself.

The cryo-frozen body before him was a distraction, but a necessary one. Its form was brutish and clumsy, but it was one Fabius had worked upon before, rewiring its synaptic receptors to create a cacophonous burst of pleasure in the

subject’s mind at the merest hint of pain. The internal workings of the body were subtle and would have made a Biologis of the Mechanicum weep with a mix of admiration and horror.

Icy mists filled the surgical chamber, every last trace of warmth sucked from the space by powerful refrigeration units that chugged and growled beneath the metal flooring.

His custom-designed Chirurgeon array squatted at his shoulders like an eager observer, its grotesquely articulated arms darting around him with a mind of their own, suturing an oozing blood vessel or cauterising an open vein. Its clicking digits were more dexterous than his own hands, but there was a satisfaction in feeling the soft wet texture of an opened body beneath the haptic fingertips of his gauntlets.

Fabius wore armour contoured to his lean form, enhanced at the waist and shoulders to better support the Chirurgeon, with additional joints and custom-fabricated gauntlets that incorporated numerous tools of excruciation and healing. A long cloak of pale white hung from his shoulders, stained red with blood at its trailing edge.

Lank hair, bleached of colour and life, hung in matted ropes from his scalp, and eyes of utter blackness glittered in a face made gaunt by malnutrition and abstinence. A rasping tongue licked along Fabius’s lipless mouth, like a lizard tasting the air.

‘Are you not finished yet?’ said a voice from the far side of the laboratory, but Fabius did not turn from his work. ‘The Legion will be assembling for the drop to the planet’s surface.’

‘They have already left,’ said Fabius. ‘The Phoenician and his flawless host will soon be guests of the Lord of Iron.’

‘I should be with them! You promised I would be with them!’

Fabius shrugged. ‘More pressing matters arose,’ he said. ‘Be glad I attend to you at all. Had the decision been mine, I would have left you to die.’

‘I *did* die.’

Fabius waved away the semantics. ‘Life, death. Words. Life is a purely mechanistic process, the body a machine that can be restarted when the motive force behind it fails.’

‘Easy for you to say, Apothecary, you’re not the one that’s dead.’

‘And neither are you, though if you persist in distracting me, I may oblige you.’

‘The primarch would kill you.’

‘Oh, ironic fate that we should both perish by the same blade…’ laughed Fabius.

The voice fell silent, which surprised Fabius, but it gave him a chance to continue his work in peace. The cut was a clean one, the blow struck with enough force and by a sharp enough blade that there was virtually no tissue damage beyond the exact point of impact. It was a killing blow of perfect precision, one that only a primarch was capable of delivering.

‘What is taking so long anyway?’ said the voice, and Fabius ground his teeth at the tonal implications of his tardiness. ‘You are supposed to be the best, or was that another of your hollow boasts?’

Fabius bit back a caustic response and resisted the urge to wreak some spiteful harm on the body before him. Instead, he said, ‘The nerve clusters at the base of the neck have been severed completely, and, trust me, the consequences of them being reconnected wrongly would not be pleasant.’

‘I can live with pain.’

‘And you will,’ promised Fabius. ‘The greatest of pain. You will know pain like no other, and it will drive you mad with joy. Every instant of life I give you will be spent in a symphony of pain and pleasure. You will hate me and worship me in equal measure, I think.’

‘You should know that I have always hated you, Fabius.’

Fabius turned to address the speaker and grinned, the expression like that of a lecherous skull taking great pleasure in knowing that the living would soon be its kin.

‘You waste your hate on me,’ said Fabius. ‘I do not take enough notice of your existence for it to be anything other than an irrelevance. Loftier matters demand my attention, not this patchwork abomination of flesh.’

‘I think I will kill you some day.’

‘You will not,’ said Fabius.

‘You are arrogant.’

‘And you are a fool. Think of all the sensation that might yet be yours, the cravings of flesh and blood yet to be satisfied. Imagine the glories you will forgo by antagonising me and causing me to kill you.’

‘The primarch himself ordered you to restore me,’ said the voice, almost pleading.

‘A moment of misplaced remorse,’ said Fabius, bending back to his task as the Chirurgeon clicked impatiently. ‘One he probably already regrets. No, my friend, be assured that if you die down here you will not be missed. Already your fellow

captains jostle and scheme to assume your mantle…’

‘I will return stronger and more powerful than ever before!’

‘That you will,’ agreed Fabius, turning back to the voice. ‘Now be silent and let me work.’

On the far side of the shadowed laboratory, a severed head sat atop a crown of surgical spikes, tube feeds, blood pumps, electro-cortical stimulators and coolant coils that kept the brain within from death.

Head and body belonged together, but had been shorn by a single blow from Fulgrim’s golden-bladed sword.

The severed head watched Fabius at work on his dead body and plotted on the many ways he wanted him to suffer.

Somewhere around the hardpan of the Emperor’s Children dropsite three kilometres beyond the valley mouth, a riot had collided with a triumphal parade. That could be the only possible explanation for the gaudy cavalcade of noise, colour and spectacle that processed into the valley. Ten thousand mortals provided a vanguard for the III Legion, a frantic host of screaming men and women, swirling banners and discordant noise blasting from instruments that bore no relation to anything crafted by a sane musician.

Blooms of coloured and perfumed smoke wafted ahead of the host, fanned by glassy-eyed ogryns whose contoured body-armour had been hammered to their flesh by barbed spikes. Forrix watched with a mixture of anger and horror at the sight of the approaching rabble, a decadent celebration of every perversity and degradation known to man.

The senior officers of the Iron Warriors had assembled at the towering barbican of the southern contravallation to greet the Phoenician and his Lord Commanders, and this was how they were met? With carnivalia and lunacy? Forrix glanced towards Perturabo for some sign of how this insulting display had skewed his humours, but the primarch’s expression was as impermeable as the hardest rock, as expressionless as the mechanical warriors of the Iron Circle arranged in an arc behind him. Forrix stood at the right hand of Perturabo, his heavy plate gleaming despite the meagre time that his armoury serfs had had to prepare him. Barely had Vull Bronn given his warning of the III Legion’s arrival than the primarch had led them from the *Cavea Ferrum* and summoned his Legion. A hundred and two Land Raiders chevroned in gold and jet growled at their backs, alongside heavy artillery pieces with their elongated bronze barrels raised to the heavens in salute. Ranks of smaller crew-served weapons were

arrayed in honour of this meeting of demigods, their gunners resplendent in the bronze cloaks of the Stor-bezashk.

In the shadow of the monolithic walls, battalions of the Thorakitai stood ranked in their tens of thousands, shuffling and jostling as their discipline master's electro-goads whipped them into formation. Before them stood two hundred Grand Battalions of Iron Warriors, fifty thousand warriors in amberdust-burnished warplate, like the ranked-up statues of a heathen king afraid to meet the souls his armies had consigned to the afterlife.

Such a display of might and magnificence had not been seen since the slaughter unleashed upon the black sands of Isstvan. It was a host to conquer the stars and remake the galaxy, the likes of which would one day shake the very foundations of the Imperial Palace on Terra.

And this was but *one* of the Warmaster's armies.

The Stonewrought stood beside Forrix, and he took a moment to admire the iron-bladed entrenching tool slung across the warrior's back. As much a weapon as a tool for breaking ground, it was a masterfully crafted implement. The edge was hard and given a subtle bevel that would bite earth and flesh with the greatest of ease.

Soltarn Vull Bronn was a shaven-headed lieutenant of the 45th Grand Battalion, with thin eyes and skin that was pale in the face, leather-brown at the neck from staring so long at the ground. Forrix had watched Vull Bronn lay his hands upon the rock of a dozen planets and, through some unknowable geological communion, learn its secret vulnerabilities, its strengths and its weaknesses. Where it would most readily break open and where it would resist every pick, drill and explosive.

The skin of a world spoke to him, and that alone was worth the price of his dull company.

Barban Falk, towering and absurdly *solid,* stood at Perturabo's left hand. Only a head shorter than the Lord of Iron, he was nevertheless made small by the primarch, who imprinted his presence on the face of the world like a statement.

The Legion's newest triarch took his place at Falk's side, his armour still battered from the assault over the walls of the citadel. The ceramite of Kroeger's plate had been cleaned of blood, and the unsullied suit made him look somehow *less* than Forrix knew he could be.

Toramino stood behind Forrix, and the master of the Stor-bezashk made no attempt to hide his disdain for Kroeger and the rank to which he had been elevated. As much as Forrix enjoyed Toramino's displeasure, he had a nagging

suspicion that this insult to the warsmith's pride would not be forgotten or forgiven.

Behind the primarch stood the mighty form of Berossus, restored to the Iron Warriors through the genius of the Techmarine at his side. The iron and adamantium sarcophagus at the heart of his Dreadnought body was a funerary casket of machine-stamped skulls and exhumed bones, the siege hammer and rotary cannon his instruments of death. Oil drizzled from his armoured flanks and his augmitters growled with low-level static burrs like grinding metal. Twin lengths of chain hung from Berossus's back, and fettered at their ends were two bloodied figures, one encased in a full-body splint cage, the other clad in the fragmented remains of the dusty gold armour of the Imperial Fists.

The forward elements of the capering host were drawing near, and coils of hallucinogenic fog writhed between the legs of the riotous assembly. It moved with a life of its own, eager to explore its creators' bodies and taste their sweat, their breath and their dirt. The screams that reached to the skies were delirious and joyous, agonised and ecstatic, a braying wall of sound that echoed from the sides of the valley like the ravings of a million madmen.

Scarifier priests spun and leapt throughout the dancing horde, their hooked chains and envenomed blades whipping and stabbing with gleeful abandon to cause pain and excruciation. Where their poisoned tips pierced an artery, the grateful victim would be seized by mad choreomaniacal fits. Roaring observers aped their lethal convulsions and the dancing mania spread ever wider, becoming more and more elaborate until the original victim's madly pumping heart emptied their body of blood and a new dance began elsewhere.

Mass psychogenic hysteria gripped the thousands of men and women, who screamed and laughed and cried like mourners or celebrants. They fought, they fornicated; moving to the rapid, pulsing beat of a driving imperative that none among the Iron Warriors could know. They carried towering banners, streaming gonfalons and serrated pennants ablaze with imagery that was at once obscene and alluring, repugnant and inviting.

Forrix recognised none of the heraldry, feeling a gut-deep revulsion at the graceful sweeps of the symbols worked into the textured banners; a meld of curves and voluptuous arcs penetrated by hard lines with barbed arrowheads atop their length. Nor were all the members of the host equal; kings and queens and princes were feted in all their finery; silks and steel, velvet and leather. Their crowns were bone, their orbs the skulls of willing sacrifices, and the sceptres made from the woven fingers of the handless handmaidens attending them.

And just as there were the gaudy courts of royal madness, so too were there regicides by the dozen as pretenders tore them down and took their bloodied crowns for themselves.

As degenerate as the dancing host's behaviour was, it was nothing compared to the physical malformations wrought on the flesh of its number. Some disfigurements appeared to be congenital, others the work of swords or maces in ritualised combat, but the vast majority appeared to have been engineered by scalpels, bone saws and genetic modification.

Men with anatomies reversed by horrific surgery capered on their hands, with legs sutured to their shoulders and faces in their bellies. Vat-grown cherub-grubs led packs of wild, spine-backed creatures, like the bastard by-blows of loathsome centipedes and giant scorpions. Women cavorted naked with scented oils slathering their bared breasts. Many were gifted with breasts beyond the number decreed by nature, and these violet-hued individuals were attended by howling slaves and weeping devotees.

Amid the heaving, spasming march of the decadent host, some were content to dance, some to debase, others to violate, yet more to scream their throats bloody as they drove their bodies to lunatic extremes of excess. They howled with the hybrid monsters and the most desperate for sensation set themselves ablaze and laughed as the flames consumed them.

Forrix took his helmet from the mag-lock on his thigh as the rapturous mass of degenerates drew near and the acrid tang of perfumes began to discomfit him.

'I saw some strange things on Isstvan,' began Forrix, 'but this is…'

He snapped his helm into the gorget seals as vocabulary failed him. No mere words could give name or reason to this behaviour, no codes of honour could reconcile this madness with the militaristic perfection and arrogant swagger the Emperor's Children had once possessed.

'What has happened to you, my brother?' said Perturabo, his face betraying no hint of the terrible anger that was raging within his heart.

'Where are the Legion warriors?' asked Falk.

Forrix scanned the heaving mass of frenetic humanity as they spilled over the outermost earthworks; cavorting through razor-wire-edged killing grounds, across spiked ditches and past iron-faced gun emplacements. What would take months of bloody siege to break through was overcome in moments by the vanguard of the Emperor's Children.

At some unheard signal, the host fell utterly silent, halting in its maddened march a stone's throw from the Iron Warriors. Clouds of kicked-up dust mingled

with the twitching curtain of narcotic smoke issuing from hidden censers. After so cacophonous a din, the silence felt impossibly loud, and Forrix scanned the sweating, breathless host for some sign of what was coming next.

That sign came as the lunatics abased themselves on the sand, prostrating themselves as supplicant savages before burning flora. Soltarn Vull Bronn dropped to one knee, placing his palm on the earth.

'Get up, damn you,' snapped Forrix. 'Iron Warriors bend the knee to no one.'

Vull Bronn ignored him and cocked his head to one side, as though listening to a voice only he could hear.

'He's here,' said Vull Bronn. 'The Phoenician. He's coming.'

Forrix looked up as the flesh host before him parted, pushing themselves back with their bellies scraping the sand to make a wide corridor between them. Through the swirls of pink and mauve clouds, Forrix could see the outline of something huge and swaying approaching. Vague silhouettes of power-armoured warriors marched alongside it, their forms granting some hope that the III Legion had not abandoned all pretence of being a fighting force.

Five hundred warriors in the shimmering purple of the Emperor's Children emerged from the smoke, and their appearance drew a gasp of shock from the assembled Iron Warriors. Slashes of vivid pigment were spattered over their armour, the myriad contrasting hues and clashing colours offending the eye with their garish disregard for the Legion's heraldry. Jagged spikes jutted from pauldrons and their helmets were byzantine winged affairs, with amplification hoods and intensifiers worked into the visors.

They carried a banner of stiff pink that Forrix could tell was fashioned from human skin, its texture and stench all too familiar to him. A runic device was emblazoned at its heart, the recurring motif he had seen worked in various designs upon the armour and flesh of the maddened horde, but distilled into its purest form. Borne by Legion warriors, the symbol offended Forrix less than it had before, and he found himself drawn towards its beguiling curves and graceful loops.

But then anger touched him, and he threw off whatever glamours were worked into its shape.

Glamours?

Where had that come from? A word of ancient usage that was meaningless in this age of reason and technological certitude. Whatever toxin burned in the censers was a powerful psychotropic indeed if it could drag such an archaic term from the mind of an Iron Warrior.

Like the mortals before them, these warriors parted to form an honour guard, and behind them came a screaming, wailing mass of legionaries whose weapons were unlike anything Forrix had ever seen in a battle- barge's armoury. Like oversized axes, they were fitted with all manner of amplification devices, tonal distorters and artefacts whose function Forrix could not even begin to guess.

Thrumming bass notes of raw kinetic force throbbed in their long necks, and he wondered if such weapons might be employed in the reduction of a fortress wall. These warriors went without helms, and their faces were a horror of distended jaws with eternally screaming mouths and gaping wounds in the skull where their ears had been surgically adapted to collect and render sound into its purest elements.

Amid the deformations, Forrix thought he saw a face he recognised: Marius Vairosean, his old comrade from the earliest days of the Great Crusade. But this twisted freak was a pale shadow of that honourable warrior, a waxwork left out in the sun too long, a noble statue beaten with hammers. Forrix took a step towards the warrior, but a taut shake of the head from Perturabo pinned him to the spot.

And then the primarch of the Emperor's Children stood revealed, his entrance as dramatic and sudden and shocking as he had no doubt intended.

Atop a great palanquin of living beings fused, sewn and warped together, the Phoenician emerged from the sentient clouds of fumes. A squad of warriors in Terminator armour bore this flesh palanquin on their shoulders, the spikes and sharpened edges of their pauldrons drawing blood and screams of pleasure in equal measure.

Fulgrim's frost-white hair spilled from beneath a helm of dazzling silver, and his entire body was wrapped in a cloak of shocking purple and golden feathers. Motion rippled beneath the cloak, like a metamorphic larva on the verge of hatching into the most beautiful creature imaginable. Fulgrim waited until his Phoenix Guard halted before throwing open his cloak to reveal his sculpturally perfect body. His elegantly curved pectorals, rolling deltoids and ridged abdominals were bare of armour and gleamed with fragrant oils. His limbs writhed with fresh tattoos of coiling serpents; tattoos that even now began to fade as his superhuman biology undid the damage to his epidermis.

Perturabo stepped towards the living platform as Fulgrim descended on a ramp of shields held out by his warriors. Forrix saw a warrior in perfect balance, who understood his body and its articulation to the highest degree. His every step was carefully placed, giving the lie to his flamboyant appearance.

‘Brother Fulgrim,’ said Perturabo, his voice as calm as the instant before the first impact of a breaching shell. ‘Allow me to present a gift to you.’

With pounding strides, Berossus approached the smirking Phoenician, who seemed amused by the stiff formality Perturabo insisted upon. The Dreadnought dragged the two Imperial Fists captives forwards, their bodies twisted in the chains and fettered in razorwire. At a nod from Fulgrim, a pair of purple-clad warriors with golden halberds stepped forwards and swept their blades through the chains. They dragged Perturabo’s gifts away as Fulgrim turned to receive a lacquered ebony case, such as might be used to contain charnabal sabres in a bygone age.

He held it out to Perturabo with a flourish.

‘And a gift to you too, brother dearest,’ said Fulgrim.

Forrix felt a twinge of unease as Perturabo took the case and opened its hinged lid. Inside lay a folded cloak of softest ermine, trimmed with foxbat fur and embroidered with an endlessly repeating pattern of spirals in the golden proportion. A flattened skull of chromed steel acted as the fastener. Set in the skull’s forehead was a gemstone the size of a fist, black and veined with hair-fine threads of gold. Both were exquisite and worthy gifts for a primarch.

Perturabo swept the cloak around himself and snapped the skull fastener around his neck. Fulgrim smiled to see his gift was appreciated, and lifted his gaze to the red rocks and barren landscape around him.

‘This is a grubby little rock you have chosen for our meeting,’ he said.

‘I had my reasons,’ said Perturabo. ‘Welcome to Hydra Cordatus.’

‘What is the meaning of this?’ demanded Perturabo, once they had returned to the heart of the *Cavea Ferrum*.

‘Meaning?’ said Fulgrim, examining the portraits on the crumbling stone walls with the detached fascination of a connoisseur of the fine arts. ‘Whoever said there had to be meaning in anything?’

‘You know of what I speak,’ said Perturabo. ‘That host beyond my walls.’

‘Don’t you approve of the company I keep?’ said Fulgrim, his tone playful.

‘That host of degenerates is beneath you,’ said Perturabo, gesturing to the violations of flesh, armour and decency wrought upon his brother’s companions. ‘And your legionaries? What has become of them?’

‘Exquisite, are they not?’ said Fulgrim.

Accompanied by three warriors as outlandish and varied as any Forrix might imagine, Fulgrim had swept into the heart of the Iron Warriors fortifications as

though every gun and every warrior was his to command, every towering siege work and soaring wall had been raised by his own hand. All but one were armoured and clearly Legion warriors, albeit transformed beyond all recognition.

One, a lean, hawk-eyed swordsman with an arrogant swagger and a complex pattern of interlaced scars marring his perfect visage, another a bulky warrior whose virtually fleshless face was burn-scarred beyond all recognition and who wore armour swathed in a patchwork of stretched skin on spikes. Another's skull had been surgically disfigured so that his mouth stretched impossibly wide, with taut sinews and implanted bone augmentation swelling in and out at his neck at the slightest sound. This was who Forrix had thought was Marius Vairosean, but surely this monster could not be his old comrade-in-arms…?

A fourth figure came too, this one without armour and clearly not of post-human stock. His frame was slender and he was possessed of a strange *otherness* in his movements that unsettled Forrix greatly. The others of the Trident had seen it too, even Kroeger, but whatever lay beneath this individual's shadowed hood was clearly a secret the Phoenician chose not to reveal just yet.

Perturabo shook his head. 'I know things have changed since we gave our oaths to Horus, that… secrets have been revealed to you, but this is unseemly.'

Fulgrim grinned, exposing brilliant white teeth that shone like polished ivory.

'Secrets revealed?' giggled the Phoenician pacing a slow circuit of the vaulted chamber. His cloak brushed the flagstones and the seductive musk of the oils worked into his flesh saturated the underground space with scents of unknown worlds, secret desires and promises of pleasures and pains undreamed. Forrix kept his breaths short, but it was impossible not to taste the acrid flavour of the oils.

'Oh, my brother, you have no idea of the things I know now,' said Fulgrim with a bark of laughter that expressed pain as much as amusement. 'Much I will share with you in time, and much is there that will bring us closer than ever.'

'Closer?' said Perturabo. 'I wasn't aware we were close at all.'

'Perhaps not,' admitted Fulgrim with a hurt pout. 'And that saddens me. Do we not share a gene-father, did we not both spring from the loins of the same heroic god?'

'No, we didn't. We were created in a laboratory,' said Perturabo. 'And he is no god.'

'Always so literal,' sighed Fulgrim, moving from the paintings to the architectural drawings laid out on the wide plotting table. 'But the point remains. We are brothers, and we *should* be close, especially now when all we have

known is falling apart, ready to be rebuilt in a glorious new image. It is my fondest hope that the shared hardships of this joint venture will bring us the intimate bond I share with Guilliman.'

'You aren't close to Guilliman either,' pointed out Perturabo.

'No?' said Fulgrim, looking up as though puzzled by his own words. 'Ah, perhaps not yet, but I will finish what Lorgar's zealots have begun.'

'Not now. Not ever,' said Perturabo. 'Guilliman will never forgive us what we have done.'

'Because there is nothing *to* forgive!' snapped Fulgrim. The Phoenician's mask of anger melted away in an instant, and he smiled. 'Forgiveness is only required by those who pay heed to mortal laws, and we are so very far beyond that, brother. What I am proposing will lift us to a realm where *we* make the laws all things must obey.'

'And what are you proposing?'

'All will be revealed,' teased Fulgrim, 'For now let us say it will be a more profitable use of the Fourth Legion's time than crushing a few rag-tag Imperial Fists on some backwater world for the sake of revenge.'

'Humbling Dorn's warriors is no waste of time,' said Perturabo.

'Well, quite,' said Fulgrim, his delicate fingers flipping through the wax paper drawings with the occasional nod of appreciation. 'These designs are wonderful. Tell me, have you built any of them?'

'Only one,' said Perturabo, placing a hand in the centre of the plans.

'Yes, of course, the amphitheatre at Nikaea,' said Fulgrim with sudden recollection that was entirely feigned. 'An arena for Magnus to be thrown to the wolves.'

Fulgrim laughed at his jest and said, 'Such a shame it was destroyed. The potential of something wondrous is only realised when it is embraced and let fly. You draw them, but never build them. Why is that?'

Perturabo met his brother's gaze and said, 'Because reality never matches our dreams.'

Fulgrim nodded in understanding. 'So often that is the way. Too often when fantasies are made flesh they disappoint and must be dreamed anew. But what would you say if I told you I could make it so that your every desire could be made real and would never disappoint, never fail to live up to your fondest expectation, and never, ever be eclipsed?'

'I'd say that you've gone more insane than you look.'

Again, Forrix saw the venomous hostility beneath Fulgrim's artful smile, like

spineless cowards who know the only way to get what they want is to play nice. Just as quickly as it arose, Fulgrim's toxic anger was masked. Forrix couldn't believe Perturabo hadn't seen it.

'It's true,' said Fulgrim at last.

'How?'

'All in good time, brother,' said Fulgrim. 'Have patience, and we shall tell you everything you desire to know.'

'*We*?' asked Perturabo, cutting to the most important word.

'Yes,' said Fulgrim, drawing the slender, cloaked figure to his side. 'Karuchi Vohra is the teller of this tale, aren't you?'

Fulgrim's companion pulled back his hood, and Forrix understood the source of his earlier unease as finely boned features, full lips, cerulean hair and amber-flecked eyes were revealed.

Karuchi Vohra was eldar.

FIVE

A Poisonous Serpent

Thaliakron

Watchers in the Wings

A moment of stunned silence stretched. Broke. All that was left was reaction. Kroeger was the first to move, launching himself at the willowy form of the eldar with hand outstretched to its slender, easily broken neck. He snatched for a sword that wasn't there, and reached out to wrap his killing grip around the eldar's throat.

But as fast as Kroeger moved, another being moved quicker.

Too quick to follow, a phantom beat of purple and gold.

And Kroeger was pinned to the plotting table in a flock of scattered drawings and billowing paper. A bare arm of marble-white flesh held him down like a pile-driver forcing its way into hard earth, and the warrior with the web of scars criss-crossing his face leaned down so that his once-beautiful features, haunting eyes and full lips were less than a finger breadth from Kroeger's.

'Karuchi Vohra's life isn't yours to take,' said the swordsman.

Kroeger thrashed against the warrior's grip, furious at the touch as much as his failure to kill the eldar.

'Take that hand away before I take it from you,' growled Kroeger.

'With what?' asked the swordsman, indicating the empty scabbards at his shoulders. 'None of us have blades here, or were you planning to bite it off?'

'Enough, Lucius, this is not the time,' said Fulgrim, though his tone was eager, almost daring his man to take this further.

'I'd release him, but I see a killer's rage in his eyes,' said Lucius.

Fulgrim turned to Perturabo and said, 'If Lucius releases your man, will it be the start of something bloody?'

Perturabo didn't answer the Phoenician and took a step towards Lucius, touching him in the centre of the chest.

It appeared to be nothing more than a light push, an indication that Fulgrim's warrior should withdraw, but Lucius was hurled back as through struck by a siege hammer. The swordsman slammed into an arched buttress and fell to the ground in a clatter of plate and splintered stone. Lucius rolled onto his back, struggling to breathe, his lungs battered empty and his organs reeling from the force of the impact.

'Touch one of my warriors again and next time I won't be so gentle,' said Perturabo.

Fulgrim laughed and clapped his hands.

'Wonderful, brother,' grinned Fulgrim. 'A perfect application of force.'

Kroeger rolled upright, ready to finish what Perturabo had started, but the primarch's hand on his shoulder kept him immobile. Again, the gesture was apparently casual, but Kroeger felt the implacable strength behind it, and his killing rage only reluctantly diminished from furious anger to simmering hate. Across the chamber, Lucius climbed to his feet and returned the compliment, but the tiniest shake of Fulgrim's head dissuaded him from further violence. The swordsman grinned and rolled his shoulders as through preparing for a bout.

'Let me kill him, my lord,' said Barban Falk, his monstrous gauntlets curling into fists.

'No, he's mine,' snapped Kroeger.

'One at a time, or both together,' said Lucius. 'It's all the same to me.'

Perturabo ignored their posturing and fixed Fulgrim with the ice-chips of his eyes.

'You bring a xeno-breed into my fastness? What were you thinking, brother?'

Fulgrim looked surprised and drew the eldar to his side. 'You always were too puritanical in your hatred of our galactic neighbours, Perturabo. Trust me, Karuchi Vohra's people are no threat to us. Their empire is dead and gone, and its people are faded ghosts clinging to the edges of existence with bloodied fingernails.'

'You hold a poisonous serpent by the tail, brother,' warned Perturabo. 'We've fought his kind before and they are treacherous. They're small and frail, but don't make the mistake of underestimating them.'

'I too have fought them. The very best of them,' said Fulgrim, his eyes alight at the memory. 'I crushed the life from one of their gods and know there is nothing to fear from the scraps of their pitiful remnants. No, Karuchi Vohra is no threat to us, for he is a new breed of eldar, one who recognises the new order arising in the galaxy.'

‘What does that mean?’ asked Perturabo, his suspicion evident.

‘It means that I know true power when I see it,’ said Vohra, his voice like warm woodsmoke, and just as hard to pin down. ‘Your Warmaster will be victorious, and I do not wish to be counted among his enemies when he sits upon the throne of Terra as master of the galaxy.’

‘Do not speak to me, creature,’ Perturabo warned him. ‘I have lost sons to your kind, and I’d just as soon let Falk and Kroeger finish you.’

Fulgrim stepped between the craven eldar and Perturabo, placing a slender hand upon his arm. Kroeger’s hackles rose at the easy familiarity, the touch fundamentally unwarranted and unwelcome. The Phoenician was a primarch, a demigod worthy of devotion, but some ill-defined quality within him made him repugnant to Kroeger’s eyes. Where others beheld beauty, he saw corruption and decadence. Where his soft words were a balm to the soul for some, they were mocking insults that pricked at his urge to do violence.

‘Brother, we should not be in discord,’ said Fulgrim, his tones low and soft. ‘I come to you with an offer to unite our forces in battle on a glorious quest. One that might tip the balance of the Warmaster’s rebellion.’

Kroeger was reminded of his words to Falk on the way down the mountain, and his anger’s sharp edges were made more intense by the surge of bittersweet perfumes anointing Fulgrim’s skin. Like the lingering traces of a chemical bombardment, years after the last bomb had fallen, the alluring musks worn by the Emperor’s Children seeped into the very walls and floor. If the sickly odour was intended to reduce the tension it was failing miserably. It was mere palliative, for the underlying causes of that tension remained.

‘Tip the balance how?’ asked Perturabo.

‘Always direct,’ answered Fulgrim. ‘One of the traits I always admired about you.’

‘One you would do well to emulate,’ said Perturabo. ‘Now tell me why you have come here and what you wish of my Legion.’

Fulgrim shook his head and cast his gaze around the shadowed interior of Perturabo’s sanctum, with its ingenious trinkets, faded works of art and memories of a forgotten genius.

His brow wrinkled in distaste. ‘No, not here,’ he said, drawing one of Perturabo’s designs from the pile of architectural artwork and holding it out before him – a magnificent playhouse of the grandest proportions, with towering porticos and triumphal stairs, a fitting stage where the greatest operas and theatrical works could be played to thousands.

‘This is a tale that needs to be told somewhere with more, what’s the word? Drama! Yes, more drama, don’t you think? Build me this grand replacement for *La Fenice* and I will tell you everything.’

‘Build you an entire theatre just for one story?’

‘Of course,’ said Fulgrim. ‘With your construction engines, it shouldn’t take you more than a day or so. Build it for me, and I shall tell you of the Angel Exterminatus.’

In deference to the myth-cycles of his adopted home world, Perturabo had named his grand theatre the Thaliakron, which meant ‘The Dwelling of Thalia’ in the Lochosian tongue. Thalia was a deity of ancient Olympia that legends told had fired the imaginations of fools, poets and writers with poetic verse and a love of strong wine. Though open belief in Thalia had long since been put aside, lavish banquets were still held on her sacred days in the ruins of her cliffside theatre-temples; proof that mankind was ever ready to pay lip service to false gods if it provided the opportunity to revel and feast.

Her theatres had tended towards the small, for even in Olympia’s heyday, pleasures had been few and far between under the iron rule of the mountain tyrants. Perturabo had seen a chance to rectify that and conceived of a towering palace of drama, comedy, love and heroism, of murder and intrigue and endings both joyous and tragic.

One of his early designs, yet no less magnificent for that, its structure was arranged in the form of an elliptical amphitheatre, carved into an imagined excavation the depth of a sizeable meteor impact. No such location existed on Hydra Cordatus, and so the titanic earth-moving machines of the IV Legion were set to work in creating one. Soltarn Vull Bronn had identified the place most likely to split apart in the desired fashion, and Toramino’s Stor-bezashk crafted earth-breaching charges to empty a vast bowl of rock.

Concentric rings of charges shook the world, and kilometres-wide plumes of fire blasted skywards, ejecting millions of tonnes of atomised debris into space. Even as the tsunami of dust spread over hundreds of kilometres and cascades of falling rubble rained down in a precisely directed fashion, Perturabo’s earth-moving machines were moving in.

Behind a screen of dust-laden clouds and unnatural thunderheads that would persist for decades and radically alter the local micro-climate, work began on the Thaliakron. It was a titanic endeavour, one that in ages past would have required the lifespans of a dozen mortal architects and master masons.

With Perturabo and Forrix at the head of an army of labourers, craftsmen and Pneumachina engines, this work was projected to last no more than two days. The Iron Warriors bent their backs to the task also, for each was a craftsman as well as a warrior, as schooled in the arts of structural mechanics as they were in close order drill. Battle-brothers as journeymen, sergeants as artisans, officers as artificers and warsmiths as grand architects.

Perturabo knew every aspect of this building's construction, from the exact courses required for its supporting underworks to the precise dimension of the goddess statues on its uppermost architraves. No facet of its construction was unknown to him, and as the lower levels of the structure took shape with the rapidity of a time-lapse pict, a long-absent animation overcame Perturabo.

This was the first time one of his creations – his follies, Dammekos had called them – had been made real for the purpose it had been designed. The Nikaean structure, thankfully now eradicated from existence, still caused him great shame. It had never been intended as a place of trial and censure, but an arena for mighty games of strength and skill. The use the Emperor had made of his creation shamed Perturabo, and Magnus deserved better than to be made sport for the baying crowds whose closed minds had already placed the noose around his neck.

Forrix excelled himself, bringing his formidable talents for organisation and logistics to bear in raising the Thaliakron, manipulating a thousand tasks at once and ensuring that no stage of the construction was delayed by a previous element remaining incomplete. In peace, Forrix was a superlative overseer, in war a relentless foe who knew that wars were won, not with foolish courage and misplaced faith, but a full supply train of guns and ammunition.

Towering construction engines devoured millions of tonnes of rubble, grinding it, remaking it and finally shaping it into blocks with yoctoscopic tolerances. Towering siege cranes swung them into position, while gangs of soldiers more used to wielding lasguns took up arms with levers, rasps and chamfer-tools. Hundreds of titanic engines, more used to levelling structures, revelled in the task of bringing one to life. Like long-necked herbivores at a watering hole, the crane arms were in constant motion, a ballet of intersecting arcs that would have been recklessly dangerous had not an Iron Warriors warsmith been directing their operations.

Despite his initial reluctance to construct a grand theatre for the telling of Fulgrim's tale, Perturabo now relished the chance to raise this building. As the hours went by, tier after tier of polished marble taken from the dismantled citadel

was added to the Thaliakron, stepping down into the excavated crater like the advance of a glacier.

Fulgrim had led his carnivalian rabble to their dropsite, leaving hundreds of mutilated bodies in their wake. Burned to ash and worked into the mortar of the theatre, the bones of these men and women would forever be part of its foundations, for all drama was founded on the ghosts of the past, the dreams of the dead and foolish notions of immortality.

As day turned to night, the first ring of statues took shape around the upper perimeter of the Thaliakron: beautiful goddesses in flowing robes, bearing silver trumpets, shepherd's crooks and masks that laughed and wept in equal measure. Tens of thousands worked on its construction, mortals and post-humans alike, for none were exempt from the inviolable logic of Forrix's calculations and Perturabo's demands. Like insects scurrying to build a great nest for their queen, they shaped the Thaliakron with a speed that was nothing short of miraculous.

By noon the following day, Perturabo's vision rendered in antimony upon wax paper was made real, a brilliant white circle cut into the red flesh of Hydra Cordatus.

His irritation at Fulgrim's abstruse motives for delaying the telling of his tale had faded with every hour spent in the work of raising the Thaliakron. His brother's love of the dramatic had always been a source of friction between them, and this latest incarnation of his quest for perfection was confusing to a warrior of Perturabo's direct manner. He knew something fundamental had changed within the Emperor's Children, but could not imagine what purpose the disfigurements and degradations its warriors now sported could possibly serve.

Perhaps this joint venture *would* grant understanding through common cause.

Perturabo was not a primarch to whom the natural ebb and flow of friendship came easily, and, truth be told, he felt no regret at turning on those who had let his Legion bear the brunt of the hardest fighting. They had stolen the glories of open battle while the Iron Warriors were mired in the broken earth of a thousand worlds.

No, his friendship was not easily achieved, but his loyalty, once won, was as unbreakable as the hardest iron. Or so he had thought, until time and taking the metal to the stone again and again had shown him that even the hardest iron can break if worn thin enough.

With the cooling of Olympia's mass pyres had come the realisation that nothing he could ever do from that moment could ever atone for a worldwide genocide. His father would never forgive him so grievous a sin, but Horus had

not only forgiven it, he had lauded his thoroughness and dedication. Horus had sworn Perturabo never to feel guilt over what he had done to Olympia, but that was an oath easier to make than to live by. Fools claimed *Forgebreaker* had sealed the pact between the Warmaster and the Iron Warriors, but only Perturabo knew it was forgiveness that bound the Iron Warriors to Horus Lupercal.

It had come as a shock to find that the loyalty of a primarch was not the fixed thing Perturabo had always assumed it to be. But like all such realisations, it could be incorporated into a new worldview, and once assimilated, a series of small steps was all it took to render everything he had once stood for as little more than a fading dream.

Perturabo had vowed that his oath to the Warmaster would be truly unbreakable, no matter the cost, no matter the nature of the fight and no matter the outcome. And if that meant hearing Fulgrim out and joining him on whatever mission might hasten the Warmaster's victory, then so be it.

With the Iron Circle at his side, Perturabo stood before the Thaliakron's towering gates of beaten iron, and stared at the vision of the goddess worked into the ironwork pediment surmounting the magnificent, columned portico. From a narrow-necked amphora she poured wine that ran down the fluted columns in a cascade of inlaid mercury. That wine was captured by the outstretched hands of her sisters carved into the two central supports: Kharis on the left, Euphrosyne on the right. Both carried masks of laughter and sorrow, yet each was subtly turned so that it was impossible to see which was which.

Perturabo smiled, enjoying the conceit, and pushed open the gates.

The sound of a waiting audience spilled out through the gates, and pride filled his chest at the thought of this dream made real, serving the purpose for which it had been conceived. He paused within the vaulted portico, letting the sounds of cheers and revelry transport him back to a time before the galaxy had split at the seams.

Perturabo shook off his misplaced nostalgia for a time that would never come again.

'No one lives in the past,' he whispered. 'Everyone is dead there.'

Fulgrim, as good as his word, was waiting for him.

Performers could take the stage of the Thaliakron from a number of artfully concealed points, but Perturabo had chosen to descend into the guts of the building and enter via a set of narrow stairs in the centre of the amphitheatre known as the Charonian Steps. This was where actors shrouded as spirits of the

dead entered the dramas being played out above, but which, more importantly in this instance, allowed Perturabo to appear in the heart of the structure without warning.

From the darkness of the narrow enclosure of the undercroft chambers, Perturabo emerged into the wide open space of the theatre, and took a moment to savour one of his earliest creations finally made real. Stretching up to a height of six hundred and fifty metres, the tiered seating stepped up the gentle slope of the artificial crater, each seat perfectly arranged to provide an uninterrupted vista of the stage.

Tens of thousands filled the seats, a cheering crowd of soldiers, legionaries, hangers-on and mobs of Fulgrim's followers. They cheered at the sight of him, and though he disliked being at the centre of such public displays, he found himself unexpectedly amused by the screaming yells of welcome.

Perturabo paused at the top of the steps and adjusted the cloak Fulgrim had given him, listening to the roars of the crowd and individual voices within it. Such were the acoustics of the space that even the softest line of dialogue could be heard by the most distant audience member, and Perturabo felt a rare flush of pride at this achievement.

Statues of the goddess and her sisters looked down from high arches that circled the amphitheatre, together with heroic actors of the time before the Emperor's coming to Olympia. Thespis was rightly given pride of place at the goddess's side, while Metrobius, his great rival, stood on the far side. Araros, the great lover of comedic poetry, rubbed shoulders with slender Hegelochus, the most chameleonic actor of his day, the so-called hero of a thousand faces.

Fires burned in scores of shallow bowls, held aloft on winged statues of ribbon-clad nymphs, each tens of metres wide and bathing the interior of the Thaliakron in a warm illumination. The air was scented with a faint chemical aroma that warred with a musky, smoky aroma of spices.

The circular stage was wide and paved with planed slabs of crushed quartz and granite, making it shimmer in the tortured glow of the irradiated clouds. No stars shone in the sky, the fallout from the short-life atomics blocking out the light from distant systems, though Perturabo's eyes could still make out the faint smear of the violent warp anomaly of the far north-west arm of the galaxy. This close to it, Perturabo could see its tendrils distinctly, reaching out to him like questing arms, so close that it felt as though they might reach down and lift him from the surface of Hydra Cordatus.

No matter how many thousands of light years separated him from this

particular warp storm, Perturabo was always aware of its presence and could perceive an echo of it on every world where he had looked to the heavens. He didn't know whether this warp sight had been engineered into his perceptive apparatus deliberately, like Sanguinius's wings or Corax's eyes, or was simply a quirk of his genetic code, but it had been a blessing and a curse since his earliest memories. The storm haunted his dreams, threaded his nightmares and coloured his every thought since he had learned something of its nature.

He'd once asked Ferrus whether his silver eyes allowed similar insight, but his brother had just shaken his head and given him a look of faint scorn, as though he had just admitted to some secret weakness or vice. He had never mentioned it again.

Perturabo shook off the memory, his feelings towards it ambiguous now that Ferrus was no more, slain by the very primarch who now stood before him.

Fulgrim was dressed more like the brother he had last seen on Isstvan V, in his purple battle armour, its subtle shades worked through the deepening hues of each plate. A fur-trimmed cloak hung asymmetrically from his shoulders and the black leather-wrapped handle of his golden sword – the selfsame blade Ferrus had crafted in the Terrawatt forges of Mount Narodnya – hung at his hip.

His brother's white hair was threaded into numerous elaborate braids that came together at the nape of his neck in a winding coil laid across his right shoulder like a sleeping serpent. In the light of the encircling flames, Fulgrim's eyes appeared even darker, and Perturabo was relieved to see that none of his brother's captains had accompanied him to this tale-telling, only the eldar creature he had named Karuchi Vohra.

'I knew you would not disappoint me, brother,' said Fulgrim, raising his arms and turning in a slow circle to encompass all that had been built for him. 'It is a triumph of the architect's art and worthy of the greatest dramas. Tell me, now that you have built one of your dreams, does it match the vision in your head when you first conceived it?'

'It's close,' said Perturabo.

'But not perfect?'

'Nothing ever is.'

'Not yet,' said Fulgrim, lowering his arms and coming forwards to embrace him.

The two primarchs came together to thunderous applause that echoed around the Thaliakron as though it might never end. Fulgrim slapped him heartily on the back and kissed his cheeks, but the gesture was alien to Perturabo, and he did not

know how to respond. The scent of the oils worked into Fulgrim's hair was strong, and Perturabo took a breath of its seductive perfumes.

'The cloak looks good on you, brother,' said Fulgrim with a grin.

They came apart, though Fulgrim kept a grip on one of Perturabo's arms, as though reluctant to break the moment of closeness they had just shared. He raised his other arm high, basking in the crowd's adulation, as though feeding on their devotion.

'We are gods, brother!' shouted Fulgrim, and the crowd screamed its agreement.

Perturabo's enthusiasm for his brother's theatrics began to diminish, and he pulled his arm from Fulgrim's grip. This overt display of brotherhood had all the appearance of an ambush, and Perturabo's first instinct was to walk away from it.

Fulgrim stood before him, his voice lowered to a whisper that not even the superlative acoustics of the Thaliakron would fling out into the audience.

'Where are your hammer bearers?' asked Fulgrim, noting the absence of the Iron Circle. 'They would look mighty in such a place.'

'They are below,' said Perturabo, taking a step away from Fulgrim. Though he had enjoyed the fleeting moment of brotherhood, he did not enjoy close physical presence.

'Why automata, brother?' asked Fulgrim, almost as an aside. 'Why not warriors of flesh and blood who are not slaves to some Mechanicum doctrina-wafer?'

'Robotic guardians never sleep, never let down their shields and will never betray me.'

'But they will never be as responsive as mortal guardians, they will never give their last drop of blood or fight to protect you out of love.'

'Love? What has love to do with anything?'

Fulgrim gave a crooked smile as though amused that Perturabo should even ask such a question. 'No bodyguards can be counted upon who do not love that which they protect.'

'And your Phoenix Guard *love* you?' asked Perturabo, harsher than he intended.

'They do indeed,' said Fulgrim, raising his voice once again. 'I am the Phoenician, beloved by all and the star around which my warriors orbit. Without me they would have no purpose, and a warrior without purpose is not worthy of breath.'

The audience cheered again, and Perturabo nodded absently, circling around to the right to better appraise the robed eldar who skulked in Fulgrim's shadow. Seen in this light, his eye for weakness saw a hollowness to the alien's frame, as though from some hunger that could never quite be satisfied. Though veiled by his voluminous hood, the eldar's features were sculptural and handsome, his lips full and his violet hair lustrous. Yet Perturabo sensed something… *missing* in him.

Very well, if Fulgrim wished theatre, then Perturabo would indulge him.

'You call yourself Karuchi Vohra?' he said.

The eldar nodded and said, 'It is more accurately a title than a name. I was a healer. In the Bielerai dialect it means–'

'I know what it means,' said Perturabo abruptly. 'It means "the ender of suffering".'

'My lord understands the eldar tongue?' asked Vohra.

'One of many I speak,' answered Perturabo in the alien's own language.

Both Fulgrim and Vohra looked surprised, and Perturabo took a moment to enjoy that.

'Or,' he said, switching to a proto-speech of guttural barks and grunts, '*we could speak in the language of the greenskins*.'

Fulgrim laughed and said, 'You are a wonder to me, brother. I had not known you possessed a talent for linguistics.'

'I've spent my life at the business end of a siege, digging trenches and razing cities, so it's easy for you to forget I have a mind as engineered as any of our brothers,' said Perturabo, trying not to sound disappointed at such a failure of perception. 'I may not have the warp-lore of Magnus or the war-craft of Horus, but being underestimated is one of my greatest weapons.'

Fulgrim smiled and said, 'I shall never make that mistake.'

'No, I think you will,' said Perturabo, turning on his heel and folding his arms across his broad chest. 'Now, tell me what is so important that it required my Legion to raise this amphitheatre to hear it.'

'It is a story of the eldar gods and their wars,' said Fulgrim. 'Of a creature so terrible and so beautiful that its brothers locked it away from time and memory.'

'The Angel Exterminatus?' ventured Perturabo.

'Yes,' said Vohra. 'The Angel Exterminatus.'

Anger touched Perturabo. 'You had me build the Thaliakron just to tell me alien legends?'

'It is no legend, brother,' said Fulgrim, coming forwards to grip Perturabo's

arm. ‘It is a truth hidden in the grave of its doom, a weapon of such power that the stars themselves turned upon it rather than allow it to escape its prison.’

Despite Fulgrim’s needlessly overwrought language, Perturabo’s interest was piqued. He knew well enough that many a legend had a hidden truth at its heart.

‘Where is this weapon?’ he asked.

‘You know where it is, brother,’ grinned Fulgrim, looking to the volcanic sky. ‘You have always known.’

Perturabo followed Fulgrim’s gaze, staring up at the swirling vortex of warp energy that seethed and boiled in the heavens.

The star maelstrom.

‘Tell me this legend,’ commanded Perturabo.

Hidden in the shadows of the flame-bearing nymphs, two kneeling figures watched the meeting of the two primarchs. But where the audience packed into the tiered seating of the grand theatre were held in rapturous awe by the two beings, these individuals felt nothing but hate. The shadows and the dust conspired to mask every aspect of their armour that might mark them out as intruders, but no one was paying any attention to them anyway.

The larger of the pair wore armour of dark plate, its insignia and Legion markings obscured by carefully cultivated layers of red dust and strung canvas, upon which meaningless scrawls had been daubed. His armour bore numerous scratches and dents that had been left unrepaired by tech-artificers aboard the *Sisypheum*. He stared at the Phoenician with undisguised loathing, his entire body vibrating with the effort of will it took not to charge headlong at the being who had murdered Ferrus Manus.

His name was Sabik Wayland and he was of the Iron Hands.

Beside him, more slender, though still clad in the blackest Legiones Astartes plate – albeit customised to reduce its visual aspect and noise in a variety of spectra and wavelengths – was Nykona Sharrowkyn: Raven Guard warrior, stealth-master and slayer of traitors.

Neither was a stranger to operating deep in enemy territory, but this infiltration was perhaps as foolhardy a mission as they had ever undertaken.

At least since Cavor Sarta and that business with the Kryptos.

‘It makes me sick to even look at him,’ said Wayland, repulsed by the sight of Fulgrim.

Sharrowkyn didn’t look up and kept the lens of his helm pressed to the sight of the matt-black needle-carbine pulled in tight to his shoulder. Converted to take a

variety of ammunition loads and operate in different fire settings, the weapon was a compact killing tool, able to slay in silence from afar or up close with a blitzing storm of solid steel needles.

‘So don’t look,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘Listen. Use that parabolic vox-thief Thamatica gave you.’

‘*Frater* Thamatica,’ said Wayland. ‘Why bother? The acoustics here mean we can hear what those traitors are saying perfectly well. I don’t need the thief.’

He spat the last word as though it were distasteful to him.

‘True, but it can record what they’re saying,’ pointed out Sharrowkyn. ‘Branthan and the others are going to want to hear this.’

Wayland debated insisting that Sharrowkyn employ Branthan’s honorific, knowing the Raven Guard would probably take no notice. Their scattered and ad-hoc organisation of combat cells was hardly a Legion-sanctioned formation, so what did it matter the titles they carried? Yet somehow it *did* matter. Now Ferrus Manus was gone it mattered more than ever.

‘His rank is *captain*.’

‘Fine,’ sighed Sharrowkyn. ‘*Captain* Branthan is going to want to hear this. I get the impression he’s not a man who likes to make decisions based on second-hand information. Even from someone like you, my friend.’

Wayland nodded, ashamed at having this aspect of his task here pointed out to him. His thoughts, normally so clear and ordered like the workings of a machine, had been wrenched askew by the sight of the Emperor’s Children’s primarch. To see the killer of Ferrus Manus laughing as though his hands were not red with murder was a gross insult, a stain on the honour of the Iron Hands that was yet to be avenged.

No warrior of the X Legion had laid eyes on the Phoenician since the betrayal at Isstvan, and Wayland felt the heavy burden of the dead’s vengeful expectations fall to him. His heartbeat thundered in his chest and the metallic fingers of his left hand clenched into a fist as he remembered the Phoenician’s blow that had kept him from the side of Ferrus Manus.

‘Focus, Sabik,’ said Sharrowkyn, sensing his building fury. ‘My Legion suffered at their hands too. Do your job and we’ll be able to strike back at them all the harder.’

Wayland let out a breath, knowing Sharrowkyn was right, but finding it increasingly difficult to keep his Medusan anger in check. Disappointed with such weakness, he took a moment to calm his imbalanced humours, letting the choleric ease and the melancholic ascend to the fore. Where a great many of the

Iron Hands were impulsive and quick to anger, Wayland had long ago mastered the ability to distribute his humours to be always in balance.

Or so he had thought until the moment he had seen Fulgrim take to the stage.

The memory of what the Phoenician had done cut through him like a las-solder through plastek, and only Sharrowkyn's restraining hand had kept him from exposing their intrusion.

'You're right,' he said, letting out a calming breath. 'My weakness shames me.'

'It's not weakness to hate them,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Use it, brother, hone its edge until the time comes to strike. Then it will be all the more potent when unleashed.'

Throughout his uncharacteristically verbose response, the Raven Guard hadn't moved so much as a muscle, the sight of his needle-carbine still pressed to the lens of his helmet.

'Could you actually take a shot from here?' asked Wayland, breaking out the vox-thief gear and setting the innocuous black box on a telescoping tripod. A number of matt-black cables extruded from his gauntlet and these he hooked into the back of the device, which immediately gave a soft buzz to let him know it was functional.

'Yes, though they're at the extreme end of my needle-carbine's effective range, even if they weren't primarchs.'

'Tempted?'

'Very much so,' said Sharrowkyn, easing a slender finger through the trigger guard and applying fractional pressure. A range-finder clicked as it adjusted the muzzle grooving. 'I might just do it to see if that Storm Eagle of yours is worth certifying.'

'Trust me, there's nothing flying these traitors possess that can catch it.'

'I believe you, but here's hoping we don't need to put it to the test.'

The vox-thief chirruped as Wayland bracketed the three figures in the centre of the amphitheatre, and he heard the click of rotating cogs within as it began recording. As he had told Sharrowkyn, they didn't need the device to hear what was being said, but Sharrowkyn was right; even in his current state, Captain Branthan would want to hear the traitors' words for himself before committing them to a course of action.

Yes, the Iron Hands had been effectively gutted by the betrayal on the black sands, their veterans decimated and their demigod father cut down by a faithless brother, but that only made them all the more dangerous. Like a punch-drunk

fighter who refuses to stay down, the Iron Hands had come back to the fight even stronger.

Wayland turned his thoughts from retribution to the figures below, as the primarch of the Iron Warriors circled around a thin figure swathed in obscuring robes. Who might be deemed important enough to stand in the presence of two primarchs was a mystery, but that he was here at all indicated he was worthy of attention.

The words of the two traitor primarchs drifted up to the highest reaches of the grand theatre. Sharrowkyn and Wayland listened to their discourse with a mounting sense of horror as the Phoenician explained why he had come to Hydra Cordatus.

‘Throne…’ hissed Wayland.

‘That doesn’t even come close,’ whispered Sharrowkyn.

‘I think maybe you should take that shot after all.’

Sharrowkyn flipped off the safety and said, ‘I think you’re right.’

SIX

Maelsha’eil Atherakhia

A Shot in the Dark

The tale belonged to Karuchi Vohra’s race, but it was Fulgrim who took centre stage to tell it. Never at ease with others sharing the limelight, the Phoenician had become narcissistic to the point of egomania, Perturabo saw. He watched Fulgrim as he circled theatrically, the great actor promenading before delivering his greatest soliloquy. Fulgrim took up a heroic pose, more like an actor pretending to *be* him than himself.

‘Brothers and sisters,’ began Fulgrim, with a deep bow. ‘I come before you all to tell a tale of forgotten days, of lost empires and an age of the galaxy before the rise of mankind. We rule now where an ancient race once claimed dominion, and though it declines to its inevitable doom, there are still remnants of its empire’s lost glory in the secret places of the galaxy. Listen well and I will transport you through the mists of time to the last days of this decadent race…’

Fulgrim’s words were delivered with panache and the precise variation in tone to hook the imagination of the audience. To Perturabo’s ears, they were needlessly ostentatious and took twice the time to tell as was required. Whatever the story to come, Perturabo knew he could tell it with more economy and clarity, but those were two concepts Fulgrim appeared to have left behind in his headlong plunge into whatever obsession was driving him.

He stood with his arms folded as Fulgrim stalked the stage like a prowling killer, his pallid flesh and ebony eyes sweeping the crowd as though searching for something.

Fulgrim lifted one arm to the sky. ‘We begin in a time before time, when mankind was yet to crawl on his belly from the primordial waters to the mud of the shore. We were not yet worthy to inherit the mantle of gods, for another race claimed that honour, and the universe does not permit more than one pantheon to name itself divine.

‘The children of Asuryan they were, wrought from the fiery flesh of their godhead and cast into the galaxy like seeds from a ploughman’s hand. They called themselves eldar, and their empire stretched from one side of the Monoceros Ring to the other, from Perseus to the farthest reach of Scutum-Centaurus. Their empire was mighty and proud, for their gods had granted them the means to travel the length and breadth of their realm in the blink of an eye. The warrior kings, Eldanesh and Ulthanesh, led their armies in wars of conquest that saw every foe who dared stand before them brought low. And yet, even with the entirety of the galaxy as their domain, the selfish eldar were not satisfied. Eldanesh wept for the emptiness of his playground, and Isha, the whore goddess from whose bleeding loins the eldar had sprung, shed bitter tears that brought fresh life to the galaxy. Her grief was a wellspring of creation that brought many new and wondrous races into being. All for the amusement of her children, an act of such foolish indulgence that it beggars belief.’

Perturabo watched Karuchi Vohra as Fulgrim spoke, and though his hood was still raised, it was possible to see the effect the storytelling was having upon him. With each pejorative mention of the eldar, a muscle in Vohra’s face would twitch, a nervous tic that would have been invisible to any perception save that of a primarch.

Whatever the audience might be feeling towards Fulgrim’s tale, Vohra was not enjoying it.

Fulgrim circled the amphitheatre, his voice mellifluous, a euphony of sound that was unwillingly drawing Perturabo into the web of characters and plots as Fulgrim gave name to eldar heroes and kings, their great thinkers and, of course, their enemies.

What drama would be complete without a nefarious evil to oppose?

‘As all here know, power begets jealousy and the king of the conquered Hresh-selain race plotted and schemed in the darkest reaches of the galaxy.’

As Fulgrim gave name to this king, he stooped and rubbed his hands together, like a children’s tale-teller making a pantomime of villainy. The effect was laughable, yet the crowds in the tiers responded with jeers and howls of outrage. Perturabo was dumbfounded at the reaction his brother’s manipulative words were having, yet even he had to confess to a mounting interest in the legendary tale being woven around him.

‘The armies of Hresh-selain, rebuilt in secret and scattered in dimensions beyond the reach of the eldar, finally assembled and struck back at their conquerors. With their king at their head, the Hresh-selain slaughtered the eldar

by the tens of thousand in battles that left entire regions of the galaxy uninhabitable for millennia.

‘The eldar were mighty, yes, and their warriors peerless, but the armies of the Hresh-selain outnumbered the stars, and though each battle saw the dead number in the millions, it was but a drop in the ocean to the full might of their grotesque battle hosts.’

Fulgrim had by now unsheathed his sword and the golden blade drew fresh gasps of astonishment and roars of approval. Fulgrim spun and leapt like a dancer, yet Perturabo saw the fierce skill in his every move, the lethal grace that had made his brother a matchless swordsman, beyond even the technical ability of Guilliman or the enraged purity of Angron.

‘The eldar were on the verge of defeat, and the gods wept to see their favoured children so humbled. Once again Eldanesh cried for his mother goddess to aid him and she was shamed enough by his pleas to beg her brother-husband, the war god Kaela Mensha Khaine, to fight alongside the eldar. Khaine refused, for he had ever been jealous of Asuryan’s brood and relished the sight of their pain. But when Isha offered him the sanctity of her once-virgin flesh, the war god relented and took what she offered without heed for her life. No sooner had he planted his bloody seed in Isha’s belly, than a fiery avatar tore its way from her womb with claws of blood and a hunger for destruction beyond even the war god’s power to unleash…’

Perturabo felt the audience’s terror at the idea of so monstrous a creature, though what the allegory of legend actually meant in terms of real history was impossible to tell.

‘Isha’s death scream was her warchild’s birth scream, a battle cry that stilled the very heart of the galaxy in fear and echoes in the hearts of all who spill blood to this day. The eldar knew this being as Maelsha’eil Atherakhia, a name unspoken by their race, but which lives in their withered hearts as a gnawing fear.’

‘What does the name mean, brother?’ asked Perturabo. ‘I know the tongue of the eldar, but those words are unfamiliar to me.’

Fulgrim paused in the telling of the tale, his face a brittle mask that looked to be on the edge of violence at this interruption.

‘It is an ancient name, my lord,’ said Karuchi Vohra. ‘One never spoken aloud. It means the *beautiful eagle from hell that brings the end of all things*. Which translates imperfectly as–’

‘The Angel Exterminatus,’ finished Perturabo.

‘Then might I continue?’ snapped Fulgrim, still poised on the brink of hostility.

Perturabo nodded and Fulgrim slipped back into the tale as though he had not spoken.

‘The Angel Exterminatus joined the fight against the Hresh-selain, and mighty were the slaughters it wreaked across the galaxy. Eldanesh welcomed its aid, even as he realised his own cowardice had caused the death of his mother goddess. Ulthanesh was broken by the price they had paid for this newborn creature of destruction, a beautiful creature that inspired love and terror in equal measure. Truly the Angel Exterminatus was an eldar demigod like no other, blessed with the most beguiling countenance, the greatest strength and the highest intellect. What the gods knew, it knew, and what power they feared to wield, it unleashed with a song in its heart.

‘While Ulthanesh quailed at the power of the Angel Exterminatus, Eldanesh grew to love the stink of blood in his nostrils, the smell of charred flesh and the sight of carrion picking the flesh of the dead. He grew jealous of the power so casually wielded by the Angel Exterminatus and plotted to bring it to ruin once the war against the Hresh-selain was done. Yet even as his people’s enemies retreated in the face of the Angel Exterminatus, Eldanesh’s desire to utterly destroy the Hresh-selain grew to become an obsession. Only the total extinction of his foes would satisfy such bloodlust, and he bade the Angel Exterminatus to craft weapons that would wipe their worlds from time and memory. Blind to Eldanesh’s madness, the Angel Exterminatus agreed, and forged weapons of such power that their very concept drove those who learned of them to take their own lives, rather than live in a galaxy where such things were conceived.’

Now Perturabo’s interest was well and truly snared. Whether this was embellished allegory or wild fantasy didn’t matter. *This* was the heart of the matter and the crux upon which his indulgence hung.

‘To fashion such weapons was no little matter,’ said Fulgrim. ‘And the Angel Exterminatus was weakened by their creation, for much of its power was bound into their destructive hearts. Exhausted by its labours, it sank into a great slumber on an ancient battleground, leaving Eldanesh to revel in what it had created. But Eldanesh saw what the Angel Exterminatus had wrought and despaired, for he now understood that such weapons were an abomination. The veils of his madness parted, and he saw what he had become and what he had lost in his quest for victory. He summoned Ulthanesh to his side, and offering great prayers to Asuryan, they sought to banish the Angel Exterminatus to the

netherworlds beyond the walls of space and time and consign it to the hells from whence it had been conceived. Sensing their intent, the Angel awoke from its rest and fought back.'

Fulgrim hacked his sword through the air as he spoke, each stroke theatrically desperate, as though he fought for his life against unseen opponents that were steadily wearing him down. Breathless and dishevelled, Fulgrim dropped to one knee, his golden sword held out before him, a perfect rendition of a beleaguered hero, bowed, but unbroken. Perturabo had long since tuned out the more mythic elements of the tale, focusing instead on what the truth behind the legend might be.

Fulgrim rose unsteadily to his feet, as though pushing against an invisible force that sought to keep him down. 'Such a battle had never yet been seen in the ages of the galaxy. A being with the power of a god assailed by its wayward heirs, and no mercy was to be found in their hearts as blood flowed and the very warp and weft of the galaxy was torn asunder by the violence of their conflict. None now live who remember how long these demigods fought, but against the power of the Angel Exterminatus, Eldanesh and Ulthanesh could not hope to prevail. Both were driven to their knees, and faced the final wrath of the very thing they had helped to create. But before the Angel Exterminatus could slay them, Asuryan himself intervened to save his foolish sons. The Angel Exterminatus was a god, but Asuryan had ruled the heavens for an age before it had sprung from Isha's bloody carcass, and his power was terrible to behold. He finished what Eldanesh and Ulthanesh had begun, and ripped the galaxy apart, folding the tortured skeins of space and time around the Angel Exterminatus and sealing it away in a prison from which there could be no escape, and no reprieve from the terror it had unleashed.'

Perturabo hid his scorn at such a *deus ex machina* ending to the legend, but as Fulgrim cast his eyes heavenwards, he knew what was coming next.

'Behold the ancient prison of the Angel Exterminatus!' screamed Fulgrim, thrusting his blade towards the fallout-wracked clouds. Though kilometres thick, a halo of light parted them for long enough for the night's blackness to become visible.

And in that slice of darkness, the ugly bruise of the star maelstrom.

'Range confirmation?'

'Five hundred and six metres.'

Sharrowkyn used the tip of his right thumb to minutely adjust the focus of his

sight. The position he had selected was an optimum kill site, in line with prevailing winds to prevent projectile drift that would alter his shot's trajectory. Thermo-auguries on his cooled rifle sheath measured the surrounding temperature and blinked a correction to compensate for what lift the warm air would impart to the large-bore steel needle.

Likewise, the strength of the planet's geomagnetic field factored into Sharrowkyn's calculations when deciding upon the angle of his shot.

In his mind's eye, any conventional target was already dead.

But a primarch was no conventional target.

'As soon as I take this shot, we go,' said Sharrowkyn. 'We get out, and we get out fast. Even if I miss, you understand?'

'I understand,' said Wayland. 'Don't worry, I won't go berserk and charge in single-handed.'

Sharrowkyn sighted on his target's skull, slowing his heart rate and letting his breathing even out as he applied the tiniest pressure to the trigger. Ready icons winked to life on his helm, a dotted line tracing the route his needle would take.

Right through a primarch's eye.

'Taking the shot,' he said.

The crowd bayed at the sight of the leering smear of unlight and tortured spacetime in the heavens and Perturabo despised them for their easily bought wonder. They had no idea the danger it represented, the dreadful insidious canker that wormed its way into the heart. Like a wasting sickness of the soul, its appearance abraded all joy and all life from those who saw it, and Perturabo had seen it for a very long time indeed.

'The great star maelstrom!' cried Fulgrim, like a fiery preacher of a bygone age. 'A wound ripped in the galaxy to imprison a godlike being by a race who would not accept that their time was at an end. This is where the greatest glory and the greatest shame of the eldar lies bound by chains that Asuryan decreed never be undone until the end of the universe itself. And so it has been from that day to this…'

Fulgrim paused, savouring the deliciousness of what he was about to say and letting the moment of anticipation build until Perturabo feared the audience might riot if he kept silent much longer.

'But Asuryan is forgotten, his people broken by their own weaknesses, and we pay no heed to the decrees of a failed god. The way is open for those with the boldness to act.'

Fulgrim sheathed his sword, his eyes fevered, his skin sheened in perspiration.

His chest heaved with the effort of storytelling, as though he had played host to the spirit of Thalia herself. Perturabo saw through the fiction of his exhaustion, knowing his brother was playing to the crowd's expectation and the grandeur of the amphitheatre.

'While the Angel Exterminatus sleeps, we will storm Asuryan's gaol and take for ourselves the weapons forged in ancient times!' roared Fulgrim.

Perturabo saw the tiny puff of blood appear on Fulgrim's skull a second before he heard the crack of the shot. Fulgrim's black eyes rolled back into his skull.

'No!' cried Perturabo as his brother dropped to the flagstones of the arena, his ashen face masked with blood.

'Go!' shouted Sharrowkyn, already moving and collapsing the long-range scope of the carbine. He turned and ran for the shadowed cloister of statues that ringed the outer circumference of the great amphitheatre as pandemonium erupted behind them. Baying cries of horror and anger echoed all around them, amplified tenfold by the structure's acoustical genius, but neither Sharrowkyn nor Wayland had time to savour them.

The hunters would already be on their trail.

'Did you kill him?' asked Wayland as they reached their exit point, where coiled lengths of high-tensile wire were hidden in the shadows.

'I hit him where I meant to,' said Sharrowkyn, looping his wire around the neck of a goddess statue before attaching it to a metal ring on his armour. 'Whether that's enough to kill him is another matter. Drop now, talk later.'

Both warriors turned back to face the centre of the amphitheatre, balancing on the lip of a carved stone ledge hundreds of metres above the ground.

'Ready?' asked Sharrowkyn.

'Ready,' confirmed Wayland.

'Drop.'

Sharrowkyn pushed out from the ledge and fell in a curving parabola down the face of the building. He controlled the rapid descent with his heavy-duty gauntlets, slamming back into the face of the structure halfway down. Marble cracked beneath his boots and fell in a splintered white rain to the ground below. Wayland was still higher than him, his jumps shorter. Sharrowkyn jumped again, turning in mid-flight to face the ground as it rushed towards him.

Crowds were already flooding from the amphitheatre in a panic. Perhaps they feared Imperial retribution, a warfleet that had approached in secret and not

fallen foul of betrayal.

Would that were the case, thought Sharrowkyn.

Shots rang out, blasting chunks from the carved bas-relief above him, and he saw three warriors in the dull, unpainted armour of the Iron Warriors with their weapons trained upwards. Sharrowkyn arrested his descent as he snapped the wire from the metal ring. He fell the last twenty metres to the ground, landing with his weapon unlimbered and ready to fire.

He dropped to one knee and put a burst of needles through the visor of the nearest Iron Warrior. The traitor fell without a sound and Sharrowkyn put a single tox-round through the grilled faceplate of the next before rolling aside as a tearing blast of bolter fire chewed up where he'd landed. Another rapid spray of needles punched through the thin neck joint of the third Iron Warrior and blood sheeted down his bare metal breastplate as he toppled.

Wayland crashed to the ground next to him, and Sharrowkyn winced at the awkwardness of the Iron Hand's landing.

'A Corrivane novitiate has more grace in the air than you, brother,' said Sharrowkyn.

Wayland grunted a reply and ran south as the sounds of panic spilled from the amphitheatre with the baying mobs of enemy followers and warriors. Sharrowkyn set off after him, following the course they had plotted en route to their clandestine observation of the two traitor primarchs. What had been planned as a fact-hunting mission had become one of assassination.

They moved through the debris of the theatre's ultra-rapid construction, a city of vast spoil heaps, trenches, material stores and towering construction engines. Abandoned worker camps and supply depots flashed past on either side as they made their escape. Amid the sounds of terror surrounding the amphitheatre, Sharrowkyn heard the unmistakable sounds of pursuit. A life lived behind enemy lines had given him a preternatural sense for being hunted. For all that he hated the traitors and all they had done, he didn't forget that these were warriors of the Legions. They were just as deadly and just as proficient as any of the Emperor's warriors.

But they had never fought a Raven Guard and an Iron Hand like this.

'They're coming,' he shouted to Wayland.

'Blowing the first charge.'

A thunderous detonation shook the ground as Wayland triggered the first of many explosives seeded along their escape route. A cascade of dirt and broken body parts rained down as the echoes of the thermic charge faded.

Sharrowkyn skidded to a halt behind an overturned skip-loader, resting his rifle on the battered metal lip of the hopper. A mob of men and women in garish robes emerged from the shadow of a heap of discarded rock debris, and Sharrowkyn put the first six down with as many shots. The rest faltered in their advance, but kept coming even as he killed another five.

'Displace!' ordered Wayland. Sharrowkyn snapped up his rifle and ran.

Screams of hate erupted at the sight of him and a ragged volley of poorly aimed shots chased him down. A chugging blast of bolter fire ripped through the mob, tearing a handful to shreds and blowing limbs from yet more. Where Sharrowkyn's fire was more efficiently lethal, the savage roar of Wayland's bolter cowed the mortals more effectively.

Sharrowkyn reached Wayland's position behind a piled heap of steel rebar cages and slapped his shoulder guard, taking up a covering position as he heard the roar of engines and the thunder of booming footsteps that shook the earth.

'Rhinos,' he said.

'No, Land Raiders,' answered Wayland.

'They're looking to box us in,' said Sharrowkyn. 'We need to keep moving.'

'Agreed.'

'Go,' said Sharrowkyn, shouldering his rifle as the weight of fire intensified around them.

Wayland ran for the narrow cut between two pyramidal heaps of broken stone and loose rubble. Shots burst around Sharrowkyn, and fragments scored his armour as the angry roar of a madly revving engine echoed from somewhere nearby.

'Sharrowkyn!' shouted Wayland as another buried explosive ripped through their pursuers.

'Cover me,' he shouted back.

Bolter shots punched through the screaming mob, and Sharrowkyn ran to join Wayland.

He risked a backwards glance in time to see a pair of Land Raiders crest a metallic dune and crash back down with earth-shattering slams of iron. Their hulls were maddening swirls of purple and pink, organically scaled as though clad in serpent skin. Glistening banners trailed from their topsides and smoke dispensers trailed a mist of iridescent fumes in their wake. The sight of them was so bizarre that Sharrowkyn's step faltered at their appearance.

It was a hesitation that saved his life.

Flaring beams of incandescent las-fire pulverised the stack of rubble ahead of

him, sending a column of ash and steel mushrooming skywards. Sharrowkyn was hurled through the air and landed hard on stacked entrenching tools. He rolled back to his feet and set off again as another syncopated blast blew out the ground behind him.

Sharrowkyn dropped into a wide trench bedded with rail tracks as shots spanked from the stone and earth and the rapid spray of heavy-calibre bolters sawed the air. One shot clipped the edge of his breastplate and spun him around. He rose, kept running. He looked up to see bulky figures in Legion warplate moving along the top ridges of stone and excavated earth either side. Mass reactive fire stitched the earth around him, but the stealth upgrades worked into his battle armour were throwing off the targeting mechanisms of the enemy guns.

That's what happens when you rely on machines and not a good eye.

A shot punched down into his shoulder guard, and he stumbled, weaving left and right as the screaming roar of the Land Raiders swelled behind him. He heard steelwork groan and buckle, the screech of tracks tearing over debris and the coughing howl of engines. The wide trench opened out into a circular materials depot, heaped with blocks of shaped stone, permacrete in moisture-proof vacuum sacks, steel reinforcement towers and rows of giant pipes the size of a Titan's gun barrels.

'Find cover,' said Wayland's voice in his helmet. 'Now.'

Sharrowkyn ran for the wide-mouthed pipes, each twice as tall as his stooped-over height, and threw himself inside. He pressed himself flat against one curved wall.

'Boom,' said Wayland.

A cataclysmic detonation shook the world with seismic force. Atmosphere compressed and burst as a pressure wave pummelled its way along the pipe, crushing Sharrowkyn to the wall. Hammering echoes of secondary explosions crackled and thumped, and he felt the autosenses of his armour resetting in the wake of the pounding soundwaves and blinding glow. The pipe was concertinaed and warped as though it had been stepped on by a battle engine, and light broke in through cracks in the steelwork.

Sharrowkyn picked himself up and ran towards the far end, checking his rifle was clear of obstructions. A shape appeared silhouetted at the end of the tunnel: bulky, armoured and post-human. Sharrowkyn's weapon was already at his shoulder and he put a single toxin shot into the target's centre-mass. The warrior crumpled with a strangled cry and Sharrowkyn vaulted the body, only vaguely

noticing the hideous facial disfigurements and the strange, long-necked weapon he carried.

Reaching the end of the tunnel, Sharrowkyn backed up against the buckled steelwork of the pipe, ducking a head out to see what was going on.

It wasn't good.

The enemy had reacted far faster than they'd expected. Iron Warriors and Emperor's Children were circling around to form an unbreakable perimeter. Gangs of soldiers in khaki uniforms spread methodically through the construction site, sweeping the area with a thoroughness that surprised him until he saw they were Selucid Thorakites.

Here and there, Sharrowkyn saw the bulkier shape of traitor legionaries, bellowing orders or directing their charges with a clubbing blow. Sharrowkyn took a moment to listen, trying to gain some sense of whether he had the dubious honour of being the first Imperial servant to succeed in killing a traitor primarch. Some wailing voices claimed to have seen Fulgrim's head split open by the killer's bullet, while others claimed the wounded primarch himself was leading the hunt for his would-be assassin.

The truth was impossible to know, and he didn't have time to stick around and sort fact from fiction.

The enemy couldn't have closed the noose just yet; he still had time.

But only if he moved now.

Sharrowkyn ducked out of the pipe and made his way farther from the amphitheatre, moving where the darkness aided him, embracing shadows where the harsh beams of searchlights passed over him. Every metre he gained was a victory, but he was running out of space and time to manoeuvre as more and more warriors flooded the construction yards.

'Wayland, are you there?' he hissed over the vox. 'I could use some more back-up here.'

Static buzzed from the speakers in his helmet, and he wondered if Wayland had been caught and killed in the moments since triggering the charges. The Iron Hand didn't have his flair for stealth work, nor had he trained in Raven Guard escape and evasion techniques. Sharrowkyn owed Wayland his life after he'd pulled his wounded body onto a gunship on Isstvan V, and the thought of that debt going unpaid left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Sharrowkyn pushed onwards, crawling through pools of stagnant oil-polluted water, beneath heavy lifter rigs and between stacked building materials. He ran along the edge of a high-walled ravelin, its interior stacked with coiled

razorwire, bladed sawbucks and other tools of the besieger. He heard the creak of a footfall an instant before he realised there was someone behind him, and dived forwards as a squealing blast of sonic force blasted a metre-wide hole in the modular plascrete wall. He rolled and brought his rifle up, pressing down on the trigger and emptying the solid needle magazine in the time it took to aim. His shots pierced the Emperor's Children warrior's breastplate and misted his chest in a mass of pulped flesh.

The legionary laughed hysterically and brought his weapon to bear again.

'You only get one chance,' said Sharrowkyn, dropping his rifle and drawing his two shoulder-sheathed gladii. Each black blade was a slice of utter darkness, non-reflective and near frictionless. Sharrowkyn leapt, and his first blade sliced through the warrior's sonic weapon, the second buried itself in his neck.

And still he wouldn't die.

Sharrowkyn wrenched his blades clear as the warrior opened his distended jaws impossibly wide. He'd thought the warrior's monstrous appearance was a hideously carved helmet, but now saw the error of that assessment. Nightmarish surgeries had transformed his enemy into something less than human, a parody of what evolution had wrought over millions of years and deemed fittest for survival. He screamed with deafening volume, and though Sharrowkyn silenced him with a blade thrust that punched through the back of his plasticised skull, the damage was done.

The enemy had a fix on his position.

Sharrowkyn sheathed his blades and scooped up his rifle, running for the edge of the construction site. More gunfire puffed the earth and more screams of the hideously transformed warriors echoed around him. Sharrowkyn climbed to the top of an earthen ridge, violating the cardinal rule of skylining himself, and looked for a way out.

There wasn't one.

He ducked back as more gunfire punched the ridgeline and dropped to his haunches as a host of mortal soldiers and traitor legionaries converged on his position. Four glistening Land Raiders rolled into sight, followed by a dozen Iron Warriors Rhinos. Traitors disembarked with grim efficiency, marching towards their trapped prey.

Sharrowkyn slotted home his last clip of solid needles and scrambled back up the slope as more gunfire stabbed towards him. Las-burns scorched his armour, and damage indicators flickered angrily on his helmet visor. He turned and brought his rifle to bear, each shot pitching an enemy warrior to the ground.

He saw crew-served guns being wheeled into place: quad-lasers, small-calibre howitzers, tunnelling mortars. At least a thousand enemy soldiers surrounded him, intent on taking him alive and making him pay for what he'd done.

'Damn, but they're making sure,' he said.

Sharrowkyn heard the roaring of engines behind him, the throaty intake of hot air being gulped into powerful vectored ramjets. A storm of dust devils blew up around him as a multi-spectrally camouflaged gunship rose up behind the ridge on throbbing banks of jetwash. Coloured a dull midnight grey, its swept-back wings bristled with cannons, and its stubby prow with linked banks of heavy bolters. Missile racks on its upper fuselage locked into place with a clatter of loading mechanisms.

The Storm Eagle dipped its tapered nose and Sharrowkyn saw Sabik Wayland in the cockpit.

Wayland nodded and Sharrowkyn dropped flat as a hurricane of shells blitzed down the slope, shredding anything living in a storm of explosive mass-reactive shells and armour-busting penetrator rounds. The traitors scattered as the nose of the Storm Eagle swung left and right, turning the ground below Sharrowkyn into a boiling cauldron of hot metal and chewed up flesh. The noise was incredible, a never-ending hellstorm of chugging bangs, rotating ammo hoppers and clinking shell casings falling in a brass rain.

The enemy Land Raiders weathered the storm of gunfire, but Wayland wasn't done.

Four missiles detached from their mountings and slashed down at the heavily armoured vehicles. Three of the tanks detonated instantly, blooming fireballs immolating the soldiers who'd taken shelter behind them. A fourth lurched like a wounded animal, crushing Emperor's Children beneath its flaming bulk before internal explosions blew it apart from the inside.

The quiet that followed was like the aftermath of a terrible accident, the stunned silence before true horror kicks in. Sharrowkyn used that moment to scramble up the slope towards the Storm Eagle. The assault gunship hovered on a cushion of superheated air that turned the top of the ridge to glass. The barrels of its rapid-firing cannons bled heat and drooled smoke. Its assault ramp slammed down and Sharrowkyn wasted no time in leaping aboard.

'Go!' he shouted as he slammed a palm into the closing mechanism.

The Storm Eagle spun on its axis, furiously nimble, and Sharrowkyn was hurled against the fuselage as Wayland punched the engines. The gunship dropped and flew close to the earth as it jinked and wove an evasive pattern

through the siegeworks. Sharrowkyn struggled to reach the cockpit, dragging himself along via handholds on jutting stanchions and crew harnesses.

He dropped into the co-pilot's seat, seeing the red earth and rocky mountains swinging wildly through the armourglass canopy.

'You cut that one fine,' he said.

'If you'd kept up with me, I wouldn't have had to,' returned Wayland.

Sharrowkyn shrugged, unwilling to argue the point as the gunship's wild manoeuvring threaded a path through waving streams of anti-aircraft fire. Wayland's hands danced over the controls, flaring the engines, pumping out targeting decoys in their wake and avoiding the most predictable flight paths. The Storm Eagle's agility was far greater than any Legion aircraft Sharrowkyn had flown in, and its stealth capabilities ensured that none of the coordinated fire patterns of the Iron Warriors came close to touching it.

As the craft powered away from the valley, its madly twisting course was replaced by something approaching level flight.

'We're clear?' he asked.

'Their own gunships will be scrambling, but they'll not catch us before we're back aboard the *Sisypheum*,' said Wayland.

'What about their orbital launches?'

The Iron Hand snorted in derision.

'You're sure about that?'

'Of course I'm sure,' said Wayland. 'I designed the Nighthawk-pattern, remember?'

Sharrowkyn grinned and rapped his knuckles on the edge of the armoured bucket seat. 'You know, Sabik, I think the Mechanicum might give this variant their seal of approval after all,' he said.

'Yes?'

'Yes,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Eventually.'

SEVEN

I Was There

The Paths Above

Flesh Tribute

Fulgrim toppled in slow motion, like the mightiest tree in the forest felled without even knowing the rot was in its roots. Perturabo was at his brother's side before anyone else in the amphitheatre was even aware of what had happened. He caught Fulgrim's head as it struck the flagstones of the stage with a sickening crack. With a thought he summoned the Iron Circle and bellowed at the crowds now surging from their seating in horror to keep back.

'Brother!' cried Perturabo, scanning the upper tiers of the Thaliakron for signs of the sniper. He replayed the moment of the bullet's impact, analysing and triangulating the shot's origin point. He saw nothing, but any marksman worthy of the name would have already displaced.

The crashing footfalls of the Iron Circle surrounded him, forming an unbroken ring of protection. Legs braced, shields locked, the robots swathed Fulgrim and Perturabo in shadow and steel. The shot had struck Fulgrim on the right temple, a neat wound that appeared to have no twin on the opposite side. Whatever projectile the would-be assassin favoured was still inside his skull.

'Fulgrim,' said Perturabo. 'Speak to me.'

'Brother…' said Fulgrim, his eyes like nuggets of onyx amid the streams of blood running down his face.

'I'm here.'

'Just think,' whispered Fulgrim. 'You will be able to say you were there…'

'What are you talking about?'

'You were there the day that Fulgrim fell.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Perturabo. 'This is nothing. You and I both have taken worse wounds than this in our time.'

'I fear you may be wrong, brother,' said Fulgrim, reaching up to grip his arm

as though ready to deliver a valediction.

Blood continued to stream down Fulgrim's face, and Perturabo knew that shouldn't be happening. Even a legionary's body should have sealed the wound by now. A primarch's physiology should have ended this blood flow almost instantaneously. Had the Emperor stooped to using the envenomed tools of the assassin now? Perturabo's anger coalesced into a compressed supernova at such dishonourable stratagems. Only cowards refused to face their foes in the arena of battle, and the thought that his gene-father had sanctioned such shadow killers was a stain on every memory he had of him.

Perturabo heard the growl of his automata and the whine of their hammers powering up. Artificial muscles thrummed with building power, ready to destroy whoever or whatever was approaching.

Fulgrim stirred from his repose and said, 'It is Fabius, my Apothecary…'

'Let him in,' ordered Perturabo, and the Iron Circle parted long enough to allow a hunched figure in the livery of the Emperor's Children through. Perturabo took an instant dislike to this Fabius: the hollow cheeks, the unkempt hair and the gaunt hunger in his gimlet eyes that looked him up and down as though measuring his coffin.

The Apothecary's armour seemed out of place on his body, like the carapace of something larger worn by the parasite that had killed it. A squatting spider of a mechanised contraption lurked at his shoulders. As he set to work on his fallen primarch, Perturabo smelled a witch's brew of evil aromas – embalming fluids, noxious chemicals he couldn't place and an abattoir's worth of stale blood – that no amount of disinfectant would ever conceal.

The warrior was post-human, no question of that, but the sheer number of self-administered surgical scars visible through his thinned hair and upon his exposed forearms made Perturabo question whether that was enough for this man. Had the grotesques in Fulgrim's carnivalia been his creations?

'My lord!' exclaimed Fabius, examining the bright, oxygen-rich blood leaking from the wound. 'This must be how the Sons of Horus felt on Davin. It is truly the worst feeling I have known.'

'Shut up and heal him,' ordered Perturabo, in no mood for melodrama and disliking the comparison with the Warmaster.

'Fabius,' said Fulgrim. 'I can feel it in my head.'

Fabius addressed Perturabo. 'What manner of weapon did this?'

'I don't know, but the entry wound is too small for a bolt-round. There's too much impact trauma for a las-weapon, so my guess is some kind of solid-slug

rifle.’

Fabius nodded and turned back to Fulgrim, the flexing narthecium unit mounted on his shoulders obscuring the work he was doing. Perturabo wanted to step from the protection of the Iron Circle to find out what was happening beyond the Thaliakron, but he didn’t trust Fabius to be left alone with Fulgrim. Something told Perturabo that no one would be safe in this man’s company for long, their flesh a canvas upon which he would practise unnatural surgical experimentations.

Beyond the shields of the robots, Perturabo could hear the furious anger and growing terror of the crowd. They had all seen the Phoenician go down, and every second they were kept in the dark as to his fate would spawn ever more elaborate rumours. With a final suspicious glance at Fabius, Perturabo stepped from the Iron Circle’s protection.

He found the warsmiths of his Trident waiting for him, circling the artificial guardians like bull grox protecting a birthing mother. Emperor’s Children stood beyond them, scavengers waiting to pick off the weakest member of the herd. The imagery was unpleasant, but apt.

The Emperor’s Children moved with bow-taut urgency, desperate to learn of Fulgrim, but unwilling to risk the wrath of the Iron Warriors and their primarch’s bodyguard.

A warrior in thickly-ornamented Cataphractii plate strung with flayed skin and hung with ribbons of bone stepped forwards, his whole face a burn scar that had healed poorly and been inexpertly treated. The warrior’s eyes were cataracted nightmares of pink-veined fluid that wept viscous tears along the craggy ruin of his features.

‘Who are you?’ asked Perturabo.

‘Julius Kaesoron,’ answered the warrior. ‘First Captain. The Phoenician?’

‘He lives,’ said Perturabo. ‘It will take more than a poor marksman with a rifle to end a primarch.’

‘Let us see him,’ demanded Kaesoron, making to push past.

Perturabo put his hand on Kaesoron’s chest. ‘Don’t make me stop you,’ he said.

‘He is our primarch!’ protested the warrior.

‘And he is my brother,’ snapped Perturabo.

Kaesoron’s milky eyes swept over the highest tiers of the Thaliakron, his expression unreadable through his scarring.

‘So much for the vaunted Iron Warriors security,’ he said; an arrogant

dismissal that made Perturabo want to smash his skull with *Forgebreaker*'s head. 'This should not have happened.'

'No,' agreed Perturabo, forcing his anger down. 'It shouldn't. And if Fulgrim hadn't insisted on this theatricality, then it could have been avoided. Not even Valdor's warriors could have protected him.'

Kaesoron opened his mouth to disagree, but Perturabo shut him down first. 'You can do nothing for your primarch now. Busy yourself with catching whoever did this. Hunt him down and kill him.'

'The hunt is already under way,' said Kaesoron. 'A single marksman has no chance of escaping this treacherous act. Likely he will be caught within five hundred metres of the building.'

'And if he is not?'

'Even if by some miracle he manages to slip the net, there is no way he can get off-world or escape the fleets of ships in orbit,' said Kaesoron.

Perturabo tested that thought and found it wanting. 'If your fleet assets were arranged in any halfway recognisable formation, I might agree with you,' he said.

Kaesoron stiffened at the insult, and Perturabo arched an eyebrow as he saw the man's gauntlets curl into fists.

'Do you want to die, little man?' said Perturabo. 'Or has my brother's Legion become stupid as well as barbaric since swearing their oaths to Horus?'

'We swore no oath to Horus,' spat Kaesoron.

Perturabo hid his shock, but rather than pursuing Kaesoron's remark with a logical follow-up question, he let its implication settle in the back of his mind.

'Then listen to me, Julius Kaesoron, First Captain. This is my world and my amphitheatre. You are just an annoyance. Irritate me again and I *will* kill you.'

Kaesoron stepped back, contrite but also appearing energised by the threat of death.

Perturabo put Kaesoron from his mind and scanned the high reaches of the amphitheatre, his eyes coming to rest on the spot from where the assassin's shot had been fired. A good position, with commanding views of all the major entrances to the amphitheatre. Plenty of shadows from which to shoot, and a convenient escape route at the rear. Whoever had taken the shot could not have wished for a better sniper's perch.

Perturabo found that he hated the Thaliakron now. Its grandeur was sullied and its function perverted. Once again, a wonder he had created as a thing of beauty had been tarnished by those he had once loved.

Could nothing he raised up in glory be allowed even a moment to shine?

Perturabo turned as a Land Raider in the purple and gold of the Emperor's Children drove into the Thaliakron through the main gates, its bulk dominating the stage and crushing the flagstones beneath its heavy tracks. Its guns were ornamented in filigree and carved scrollwork had been embellished with garish smears of blood and other bodily fluids. A row of Legion helmets hung from butchers' hooks suspended on iron chains from the upper track guards: Iron Hands, Salamanders and Raven Guard for the most part, but Perturabo recognised a World Eaters helm and a Death Guard rebreather amongst the battlefield plunder. If Fulgrim possessed an Iron Warriors helm, he at least had the sense not to display such a trophy.

The Iron Circle disengaged from their defensive posture, straightening their legs and returning their shields to the locked position at their sides. Fulgrim stood proud in the centre of the battle-constructs, reborn from the ashes of his death. His features were still bloody, but where before Perturabo had seen the face of a martyr, now it was that of the resurrected.

'Brother,' said Fulgrim, coming forwards to embrace him again. 'A miracle.'

Perturabo shook his head and said, 'You live.'

Fulgrim lifted his hand to show Perturabo a long sliver of bloodstained steel, finely tapered and bent around its middle where its tip had flattened.

'Barely,' said Fulgrim. 'Fabius had a devil's job fishing that out. The angle of impact was just obtuse enough for it to deflect rather than penetrate. It travelled over the crown of my head and lodged on the opposite side.'

Fulgrim swept his bone-white hair back to show the raw incision Fabius had made in his opposite temple in order to remove the needle. A vivid purple line traced the route the projectile had taken, an arcing path of graceful curves and whorls that linked the two wounds and which had a pleasing symmetry to it.

'Just as well you have a thick skull,' said Perturabo.

Fulgrim laughed and said, 'You have the truth of it, brother.'

Safely ensconced in the underground sanctuary of the *Cavea Ferrum*, Perturabo poured two tankards of heavily spiced wine and passed one to Fulgrim, who made a grand show of testing its vintage and aroma before sipping like an ingénue at her first performance. A convoy of Land Raiders had brought them from the chaos at the Thaliakron to the heart of the circumvallation at speed, as whooping bands of Fulgrim's lunatic devotees spread the word of his miraculous survival.

‘You tell a grand tale,’ said Perturabo, draining his tankard and refilling it. ‘How much of it was true?’

Fulgrim grinned and shrugged. ‘Who knows? All of it, none of it. It does not matter how much is true and what is the sedimentary accretion of tale-tellers through the ages.’

‘If you’re looking for my Legion to join yours, then it damn well matters to me.’

‘You misunderstand, brother,’ said Fulgrim, idly scratching at the twinned wounds at his temples. ‘Gods and wars, ancient prisons… it is all mythic window-dressing. Yes, I may have… embellished some elements of the legend for dramatic effect, but the eldar bardic tradition is so dry it must be enlivened with a healthy dose of *sturm und drang*.’

‘So what *is* the truth of the legend?’ asked Perturabo, circling the plotting table piled high with his hundreds of architectural plans, knowing he would destroy them all when Fulgrim was gone. ‘Is there any at all?’

‘There is indeed,’ said Fulgrim, beckoning Karuchi Vohra to his side.

Perturabo halted in his circling, and fixed the eldar with his cold gaze.

‘So tell me, Vohra,’ he said. ‘What is the truth? And spare me my brother’s embellishments.’

‘The truth is that these weapons are real.’

‘You infer a lot from legends.’

Fulgrim put his hand on Perturabo’s shoulder. ‘Whether there ever was a creature known as the Angel Exterminatus means nothing at all. In all likelihood it is simply a constructed fantasy invented to conceal the darker truth of these weapons’ very existence,’ said Fulgrim.

‘Why would the eldar bother inventing such a fantasy?’

‘A terrible daemon god is a convenient way to excuse the creation of such dreadful things,’ answered Fulgrim. ‘Better for history to believe in its existence than the unpalatable truth that their so-called advanced species was capable of such destructive invention.’

‘I still don’t understand how you can say that their existence is fact,’ said Perturabo.

‘Because Karuchi Vohra has seen them,’ said Fulgrim.

Perturabo turned to face the amber-eyed eldar.

‘You have seen them?’ he demanded.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Vohra with a curt nod. ‘I have walked the spectral halls of the ancient citadel at the heart of what you know as the star maelstrom. A place

called *Amon ny-shak Kaelis*.’

‘The city of unending night,’ translated Perturabo. ‘Sounds inviting.’

Vohra ignored his sarcasm and said, ‘I saw its great vaults and the wards placed around the weapons. It is a fastness of such strength that only the greatest siege-master could defeat its defences in order to seize the weapons.’

Perturabo ignored the blatant flattery and turned to Fulgrim. ‘Now I see why you want my Legion, brother. You need my warriors to break this eldar fortress open.’

‘True,’ admitted Fulgrim. ‘But that is not the only reason I come to you. This is your destiny, brother. Every path of your life has been leading you here. Why else would you alone have been plagued by visions of the star maelstrom since your earliest days?’

‘How do you know of that?’ asked Perturabo, suddenly wary and angry. ‘I told only Ferrus Manus, and he mocked my question.’

‘You forget, brother, I killed Ferrus,’ whispered Fulgrim with a conspiratorial grin that made Perturabo complicit in the act. ‘And there is no bond more intimate than murder. The Emperor saw to it that we primarchs are bound by ties of blood, Perturabo, blood and so much more. When Ferrus died, I drank down his thoughts and dreams – bitter and bland as they were – and learned something of his memory.’

Fulgrim tapped the pommel of his sword and said, ‘To be frank, I did him a favour by cutting off his head. He was such a mono-directional fool, so shut off to all the myriad sensations life has to offer. His was a wasted life, one that did not appreciate that gift for the boon it truly was.’

‘I suspect he might have seen things differently.’

‘Perhaps,’ laughed Fulgrim. ‘But that is the past, and I waste no time there. Only the future concerns me, and our future lies together. This is where you are *meant* to go, to help me in obtaining these weapons for the Warmaster. Help erase the memory of Phall by seizing this opportunity to remind Horus of the Fourth Legion’s power. This is your moment to claim the glory you have always been denied!’

‘You’re forgetting these weapons are still in the heart of a warp storm.’

‘Karuchi Vohra can guide us.’

‘How did you traverse the storm?’ asked Perturabo, rounding on Vohra. ‘You’re no Navigator.’

The eldar nodded and said, ‘I have travelled the Paths Above, my lord.’

‘The Paths Above?’

‘A secret and stable route that leads right to the heart of the star maelstrom, known only to a handful of my people. It is one of our most closely guarded secrets, and I offer it to you freely, my lords.’

Perturabo was sceptical, yet the prospect of such weapons lying in wait for someone to give them purpose once again intrigued him. The siege guns the Lion had handed over at Diamat were powerful, yes, but they were powerful in a mortally obvious way. They could level walls, decimate cities, but devices capable of toppling a galactic empire…

‘I don’t believe a lot of what you’ve told me, Fulgrim, but if there’s even a hint of truth in this, then we should act on it.’

‘The Emperor clearly believes in its truth,’ said Fulgrim, reaching up to tap the scar on his forehead. ‘He sends assassins to prevent me from harnessing your aid. A fraction of a degree higher and I would be as dead as Ferrus. We have to act now. If we don’t, our enemies certainly will.’

Perturabo hated the feeling he was being railroaded by Fulgrim’s argument, but without instruction from the Warmaster, this would at least put his Legion to good use until such orders arrived.

‘Very well, he said. ‘If they exist then we need to take possession of them. They can end this war by the threat of their existence alone.’

Fulgrim looked disappointed at his lack of imagination, but Perturabo hadn’t finished.

‘Of course, we’ll need to use them for that threat to be taken seriously, though the Emperor will have no choice but to surrender when he sees such awesomely destructive power.’

‘Surrender?’ said Fulgrim, his voice a low, seductive purr. ‘Horus does not look for surrender. Leave an enemy alive behind you and he will only turn on you. No, once the weapons are in our hands, we must use them to utterly annihilate the Emperor’s armies.’

‘Then you will do this without me,’ said Perturabo.

‘What did you say?’ said Fulgrim, setting down his tankard.

‘I will only join my Legion to yours if I take complete control over the weapons,’ said Perturabo with unbending finality. ‘I shall be their keeper and I will choose where and when they are used. The threat of their power must end this war before it gets out of control.’

‘Out of control?’ laughed Fulgrim with a mocking lilt. ‘We have long since passed that point. Please, brother, what is the point of having such weapons if we shrink from using them? Like your grand amphitheatre, that once existed only as

a dream on wax paper. Look how wondrous it is. You would build it just to leave it empty and bereft of function?'

'It has served its purpose, so I could tear it down without regret.'

'Truly?' said Fulgrim. 'All that effort to raise it, and you could tear it down without a moment's sorrow? You would not leave its legacy for others to chance upon and wonder at the genius of its creator?'

Perturabo shrugged. 'It was built for you, brother. Do what you want with it.'

'I shall,' snapped Fulgrim.

Pain. It always came back to pain.

Cassander's eyes flickered behind their lids, gummed shut by blood and dust. His mouth was dry and his flesh was hot. He let out a soft sigh as he realised he was still alive. His genhanced biology was re-knitting his broken body, regrowing blood vessels, weaving dense organ tissue and extracting every last molecule of his bodily reserves to heal his wounds.

Taking slow breaths, he appraised the biological messages his damaged flesh was sending him. He remembered a grazing shot to the head, and the throbbing tightness at his right temple told him that he would have a vicious scar to remind him not to lose his helmet. His breathing was laboured, most likely a lung collapsed, and the sluggishness of his limbs could only be the result of his secondary heart taking up the burden of his blood's circulation.

He was cold and lying prone, but beyond that he knew little else.

His armour was gone, though he felt the invasive penetration of biometric trunking slotted home in many of his body plugs.

Apothecarion?

No, his last memory was the twin bloom of fire from a bolter's muzzle, followed an instant later by searing pain in his chest. He'd been shot before, but never with such anger. It seemed a ridiculous notion – what did it matter *how* you were shot? – but the venom he'd felt from the Iron Warrior as he pulled the trigger was palpable.

He'd hated Cassander, more than anything else in the galaxy.

The citadel had fallen, that much was obvious, and a corollary to that was that he was now a prisoner of the enemy. Cassander tried to sit up, but he couldn't move. His wrists, ankles, waist, chest and neck were secured by heavy clamps of leather and steel. He grunted and pulled against them, feeling something tear within him as he strained to break his bonds.

Conserving his strength, Cassander forced his eyes open, twisting his head

around to learn of his surroundings. A domed ceiling of black bricks curved above him, and a bare lumen globe swayed in a cold breeze blowing through a low arch to his right. Water glistened on the tiled walls and banks of strange machines lurked in the shadows, bearing gurgling, hissing dewars of green glass. Strange scraps of flesh floated within each one, unknown things that defied any easy classification of form.

He smelled blood and ordure, the stench of large animals and cold metal.

The slab on which he lay was part of an arrangement of eight identical mortuary slabs arranged in a circular pattern around an encrusted drainage grille at the centre of the chamber. Several of the slabs bore opened bodies, the leavings of what looked like failed experiments in hideous transplant surgery, and a device of bronze and flesh hung suspended from the dome's cupola. Its structure was a horrific meld of several combat servitors and surgical apparatus, a collection of withered scalpel limbs, drill appendages and cabling that looped around like intestines.

'You shouldn't struggle,' said a voice. 'He'll hear you…'

'Who's that?' demanded Cassander. 'Locris? Kastor? Is that you?'

'I don't know those names.'

As more of his senses returned to normal, Cassander realised that one of the other slabs was occupied by a living being. Though much of the speaker's body was encased in a full-body splint cage, Cassander saw the voice belonged to a Legion warrior.

And not just any Legion.

'Imperial Fists,' said Cassander, seeing the tattoo on the man's exposed shoulder.

Even within the immobilising cage of the splint, his fellow legionary flinched. 'I was. I failed. I don't deserve to bear the name.'

'Who are you?' demanded Cassander. 'How did you come to this place? Where are we anyway?'

'You ask too many questions,' said the Imperial Fist. 'I'm no one. I should be dead. You shouldn't talk to me.'

'I am Captain Felix Cassander,' he said slowly. 'Identify yourself, legionary.'

The immobilised warrior didn't speak, and Cassander was about to repeat his order when he received his answer.

'Navarra,' he said. 'Legionary of the 6th Company, weapon bearer to Captain Amandus Tyr of the *Halcyon*. En route to Isstvan III.'

'Isstvan III? Then how are you here?'

Again a long pause before answering. ‘We never reached Isstvan. Ambushed. I was taken. On the *Iron Blood*.’

‘An Iron Warriors ship?’ guessed Cassander.

‘Aye,’ said Navarra. ‘Captain Tyr led an assault onto Perturabo’s vessel. We were to kill the enemy primarch. We failed. Thirteen hundred warriors dead for nothing. We reached the bastard’s throne room. He killed Tyr with one blow. The rest of us didn’t last much longer.’

Anger and guilt gave Navarra strength, but it was fleeting and his tortured voice drifted into silence. Cassander looked closer, peering through the complicated lattice of steel pins and bone-drilled splints that covered his body. Navarra’s flesh was hideously scarred and Cassander saw his legs ended at mid-thigh. Numerous feed lines had been inserted into his arms and neck and the stumps of his legs, and whatever these were, it was clear they were not pain balms.

‘Are we aboard an Iron Warriors vessel?’

‘No,’ said Navarra. ‘Would that we were.’

‘What do you mean? Where are we?’

‘This is the lair of Apothecary Fabius,’ said Navarra, his voice dropping to a whisper.

‘Who is Fabius?’

‘Emperor’s Children,’ hissed Navarra, his eyes screwed shut and his entire body tensed.

‘Fulgrim’s warriors?’ said Cassander. He hadn’t expected that, but it made no difference which of the Traitor Legions held them. As Imperial Fists, it was their duty to try and escape and wreak as much harm on the enemy as possible.

‘How long have you been here? What do you know of the layout of this place?’

‘Nothing,’ said Navarra. ‘I should be dead.’

Anger flared in Cassander’s breast. ‘You have been grievously hurt, legionary, but you are *not* dead. You are an Imperial Fist, and you never stop fighting until they kill you. You disgrace the memory of your battle-brothers by giving up. We will find a way to fight back or we will die trying. Do you hear me?’

‘I hear you,’ said Navarra, and Cassander wondered what pain and tortures the Iron Warriors had inflicted upon him to so break his spirit. But hearts could be repaired, spirits mended and courage restored.

‘We are proud sons of Dorn, Navarra,’ said Cassander. ‘Our gene-father is the bulwark in our soul, the cold wind of Inwit that cools the reckless urges. We will

either find a way to survive or we will make one.’

‘A noble sentiment,’ said a voice with the rasping dryness of a belly-crawling serpent. ‘But a misplaced one. There is no escape from my vivisectoria, Captain Cassander. Not alive anyway.’

The speaker slid into the room, silently and without apparent locomotion. Cassander hadn’t heard his approach, and a primal sense for loathsome things raised the hackles on the back of his neck at the sight of the flesh-cloaked surgeon who drew level with his chest.

The man was genhanced like him, but there the resemblance ended. Gaunt and hunched, his armour’s power unit clung to his back like a parasite, and clicking, wheezing armatures reached over his shoulders. Several of the organic-looking tubes had detached from the central apparatus and were busy suckling the bio-mechanical creation, retching gobbets of a foul-smelling black ichor into its veinous structure.

The man’s lips parted, as though enjoying the sensation.

‘I am Fabius,’ he said, stroking Cassander’s scarred chest. ‘And this is my chamber of wonders.’

‘Wonders? It is a place of abomination,’ hissed Cassander, struggling once again at his bonds. ‘You are a madman, and I will kill you.’

Fabius laughed, genuinely amused. ‘You would be surprised how often I hear that,’ he said. ‘But everyone who is transformed by my knives and nightmares soon learns to love the pain I give them. Pain leads to pleasure and pleasure can be such sweet suffering. I know you don’t understand that yet, but you will.’

The intestinal tubing released the bio-mechanical contraption on the Apothecary’s back as he moved to the edge of the chamber with soft footsteps. Cassander followed him as far as his restraints allowed, but lost sight of Fabius as he busied himself in the shadows with apparatus that clinked with the sound of metal on glass.

‘So kind of the Lord of Iron to present us with flesh tributes,’ said Fabius as a number of lumen orbs spontaneously ignited. ‘Gifts from a vassal to a master, you might say.’

Cassander now saw the full horror of the green glass dewars arranged around the room – a menagerie of body parts, harvested organs and preserved heads. Even in his horrified shock, the scale of these grim specimens told Cassander that they had come from the bodies of Space Marines. He saw markings denoting at least eleven Legions.

‘A hobby of mine,’ explained Fabius, relishing Cassander’s disgust. ‘I have

viable tissue samples from *all* the Legions present on Isstvan V. Some given willingly, others… less so. But of all the samples I have in my collection, yours is the one I most anticipate unlocking. I imagine Dorn's gene-seed is closest to the source.'

'You would not dare tamper with the Emperor's great work,' said Cassander.

'Dare?' snapped Fabius. 'I dare what even the Emperor fears to repeat. I have already learned much of His knowledge, and with every step I draw nearer to perfecting what He began in ignorance – the creation of the ultimate warrior.'

Cassander struggled against the bindings holding him fast to the slab, but there was no give in them.

'Don't waste your strength,' chuckled Fabius, leaning over him as a host of blades unsheathed from his gauntlets with a loud *snick*. 'You'll need it for screaming.'

EIGHT

Departures

Little had changed in Perturabo's command chamber since the Imperial Fists had boarded the *Iron Blood*. Its rivet-stamped beams arched up to a cross-latticed vault hung with empty bird cages, and the thrum of powerful machinery echoed in the depths of the walls. Dusty banners and tattered maps of Old Earth were hung with strips of oath paper, recording victories no one beyond this room could name and of which no remembrancer had ever taken note. The door would never be closed again and the bloodstains on the wall had dried to a sticky brown. A broken console on one wall still spat sparks whenever current surged through the local circuits.

Only the fragmented corpses of the Imperial Fists had been removed, tossed from an airlock in the wake of the engagement at Phall like so much waste.

Perturabo's throne of cold iron, crafted from the molten remains of his adopted father's treasury, stood empty at the far end of the chamber beneath high lancet windows of latticed armourglass that looked out onto the ruddy sphere of Hydra Cordatus. Reflected light from the system's sun bathed the chamber in a cold, sepulchral light, and glittering points moved against the starfields, exposing the lie that they were stars themselves.

A vast fleet of ships orbited at high anchor, the bulk of two Legions jostling for space, but Forrix paid the sight no mind. His entire attention was focused on Perturabo, who stood staring at the fleet as it prepared to break orbit.

The order to withdraw from the planet's surface had come swiftly, and he had broken down the circumvallation works in a matter of hours. Bulk lifters and siege-train workhorses had hauled the shaped ironworks and prefabricated elements back to the Legion freight ships, leaving the once-fertile valley an irradiated wasteland of churned earth, bare rock and iron-rich dust. Specialised bulk-haulers had dismantled the *Cavea Ferrum* in darkness and transported its component parts back to the *Iron Blood* under a shroud of secrecy. Barban Falk had once again made his boast that he would return and build here, but Forrix

ignored his ingratiating words.

Yet even as the last ship had climbed into orbit, Forrix had a powerful sense that perhaps Falk might not be the only one returning to this world. With the siege works removed, the fleet had assumed position ready to depart orbit, a graceful ballet of efficiency that cared not for which master it fought.

The primarch stood on a raised dais, upon which sat his bloodstained throne, with the Legion's senior warsmiths arranged before him in precise ranks, nearly two hundred warriors of superlative skill and genius. There at the front was Toramino, still eager to impress despite his earlier humiliation. Several of his fellow Stor-bezashk warsmiths gathered around in a show of solidarity, and Forrix again felt the stirrings of some vague unease at the sight of Toramino's white hair and cold eyes.

Perturabo stepped forwards to the edge of the dais. 'We are done with this world. Its fortress is dust, and its defenders ash.'

No cheer greeted Perturabo's words, for he did not court the passions of his warriors, only their understanding.

'We join our forces with that of the Third Legion, our mission to break open a xenos fortress and obtain weapons of such power that we will no longer need to take the metal to the stone. Win this war and our days of breaking earth will be over. We will be warriors again.'

Before Perturabo could continue, Toramino spoke up. 'My lord, do we now take our orders from the Phoenician?'

Forrix held his breath and awaited violence, but Perturabo shook his head. 'No, Toramino, we do not. Brother Fulgrim presented me with an opportunity to wipe away our failure to destroy the Imperial Fists at Phall, and I chose to take it. In the absence of orders from the Warmaster, we will seize the initiative and become stronger then ever before.'

Perturabo shifted his focus from Toramino and said, 'That is all. Return to your Grand Battalions.'

The warsmiths snapped to attention, hundreds of booted feet slamming down in unison as they turned and marched from Perturabo's chambers. Toramino and his cohorts were the last to leave, and Forrix watched them go with a mixture of trepidation and eagerness to achieve something worthwhile.

With the warsmiths gone, Perturabo turned and sat upon his throne, sitting back and letting the echoing silence of the chamber settle upon him. Forrix, Kroeger and Falk moved to their allotted positions before the primarch, each at the tip of a trident blade carved into the iron deck plate.

‘Opinions?’ asked Perturabo.

‘I don’t trust… the Emperor’s Children,’ said Forrix.

‘Diplomatic,’ said Perturabo. ‘But I can be more honest. I don’t trust *Fulgrim*.’

‘My lord?’ said Kroeger. ‘Then why are we going along with his scheme?’

Perturabo sighed. ‘Because we have no choice.’

Barban Falk spoke up. ‘We always have a choice, my lord. We are not slaves to the whims of the Phoenician’s… questionable honour.’

‘Once I would have killed you for a remark like that, Falk,’ said Perturabo. ‘Now I think you are being too lenient on my brother.’

‘Then why do we trust him?’ asked Forrix.

‘We don’t,’ answered Perturabo, leaning forwards to rest his chin on his steepled fingers. ‘I don’t know what lies in the star maelstrom, whether it’s some dead eldar god, a stockpile of weapons or something else entirely. But there’s something valuable there, that’s for sure.’

‘How can you know that?’ said Kroeger.

‘Because my brother knows the best lies are the ones with a measure of truth at their heart,’ said Perturabo. ‘And if there *are* weapons there, I think Fulgrim intends to seize them for himself and claim the glory of their discovery as he presents them to the Warmaster.’

‘If he even hands them over,’ added Kroeger.

Perturabo nodded. ‘Now you’re thinking like a triarch.’

Gathered from the scraps that had fought their way out of the killing ground of the Urgall Depression on Isstvan V, the crew and command structure of the *Sisypheum* was ad hoc at best. It was an Iron Hands strike cruiser, but that distinction had meant nothing when the bloodied survivors of the massacre had staggered back through the firestorm of betrayal in search of escape. Iron Hands and their mortal serfs formed the bulk of the crew, for most legionaries attempted to reach their own craft, but warriors of the Salamanders and a single Raven Guard were counted among its number.

In the wake of the slaughter, escape from the Isstvan system had been a nerve-shredding series of mad dashes under fire and silent runs through the traitor blockade, culminating in a final sprint to the gravipause, the minimum safe distance between a star’s mass and a vessel’s ability to survive a warp jump.

The *Sisypheum* had escaped the trap, but not without great cost.

The months that followed saw the *Sisypheum* embark on a series of hit-and-run attacks on traitor forces on the northern frontiers of the galaxy, wreaking harm

like a lone predator swimming in a dark ocean. Traitor forces seeking flanking routes through Segmentum Obscurus were their prey; scout craft, cartographae ships, slow-moving supply hulks heavily laden with mortal troops, ammunition and weapons. Disruption and harassment were their main objectives until contact had been established with fellow survivors.

A series of coded astropathic blurts were detected on a shifting cycle of frequencies that matched up to numerical codes relating to the orbicular structure of a particular type of igneous rock found only on Medusa. Frater Thamatica had decrypted the message, and contact was established with disparate groups of loyalist forces that had escaped the massacre, and a stratagem of sorts agreed upon. With the X Legion too scattered to function in a traditional battlefield role, its surviving commanders found their own way to fight back: as the thorns in the flanks of the leviathan that distract it from the sword-thrust to the vitals.

Nykona Sharrowkyn was one of the stragglers swept up by the *Sisypheum*, Atesh Tarsa another. Neither was an Iron Hand, but such a distinction had become largely irrelevant in this arena of shadow war. Both had proven instrumental in allowing the *Sisypheum* to function and remind the traitors that the Emperor's loyal warriors were far from out of this fight.

Around the moons of Ophiuchus they had ambushed a gaggle of bulk haulers filling their cavernous holds with weapons looted from its polar manufactories. Ten ships had been crippled or punched into the gravitational clutches of the planet, and another two forced to flee with their hulls trailing fire, spilling their cargo into the void.

When a squadron of Death Guard escorts had paused in their pursuit of an Imperial vessel to refuel, the *Sisypheum* had fallen upon them like a raptor at the hunt. With Sharrowkyn's unparalleled knowledge of ambush tactics, they had caught the enemy ships at their most vulnerable and destroyed all three, never knowing if the naval crew ever learned of their mysterious benefactors.

At Cavor Sarta, Wayland and Sharrowkyn had captured an Unlingual Cipher Host – one of the so-called 'Kryptos' – a hybrid abomination creature of the Dark Mechanicum that had previously kept the enemy's code network a cryptographic impossibility to break. With the Kryptos, loyalist commanders could now access the traitors' coded communications.

And with that knowledge, Captain Ulrach Branthan had ordered the *Sisypheum* to make the circuitous journey to Hydra Cordatus and a meeting of traitor primarchs.

As Guilliman had once said of the XIII Legion, if you must fight an

Ultramarine, pray you kill him. If he is still alive, then *you* are dead. The same could be said of the Iron Hands, and never more so than when they had suffered such inconceivable loss. If the heresiarch Warmaster expected the X Legion to crumble and fall apart with the death of Ferrus Manus, then it only went to show how fundamentally he had under-estimated his brother's Legion.

To allow grief, no matter its cause, to abrade the fighting heart of the Iron Hands would be to admit weakness into their ranks. If anything, the awesome, unimaginable scale of their pain had hardened their resolve and made them even more dangerous.

They had turned grief into hatred.

Ulrach Branthan was a revered captain of the Iron Hands, but Wayland always felt a great sadness each time he went to the chamber. Together with Nykona Sharrowkyn, he made the approach to the captain's sealed quarters under the watchful gaze of two Morlock warriors.

Septus Thoic and Ignatius Numen stood at the end of the wide corridor. Both were warriors who had seen the very worst the galaxy could throw at them and had spat back in its face. Fellow survivors of Isstvan V, they had been amongst the very first Iron Hands to make planetfall, marching alongside the best and bravest of the X Legion. Like all those who had escaped the massacre, they had cut their warplate with the names of the fallen, but these warriors had a name acid-etched on their shoulder guards that marked them out as special even in a brotherhood of remarkable warriors.

They had seen Ferrus Manus die.

The lights were low, for power consumption was rigorously controlled by Cadmus Tyro, the de facto commander of the vessel in the increasingly extended times between Ulrach Branthan's moments of wakefulness.

The black armour of the two Morlocks was inscribed with intricate scriptwork, each name inscribed over the cuts, tears and burns inflicted on Isstvan V. Like other veterans, they had refused to repaint or repair their armour until the traitor who had murdered their primarch was dead.

Thoic's face was bisected by a curling series of scars inflicted by a laughing swordsman of the Emperor's Children, while Numen's features had the plasticised sheen of synth-skin after a close-range plasma detonation had seared his battle helm to his skull. His flash-burned eyes had been replaced by simple targeting optics, but his hearing was almost entirely gone.

Wayland nodded to the Morlocks.

‘Iron Father,’ said Septus Thoic. ‘Good to have you back aboard.’

‘It is good to be back,’ responded Wayland. Sharrowkyn simply nodded.

‘Did you see him?’ asked Ignatius Numen, too loudly, each word carefully enunciated.

Wayland didn’t need to ask who Numen meant.

‘*We* did,’ said Wayland, turning to Sharrowkyn.

‘What did he look like?’

Wayland wished he could tell them that he had seen a monster, a creature of ultimate evil, but that would be a deception, and any Iron Hand would prefer the truth over glossed fiction.

‘He looks unchanged, my brothers,’ said Wayland, signing his answer for the virtually deafened Numen. ‘He is the Phoenician.’

Seeing their disappointment, he added. ‘But he is no longer handsome. Our Raven Guard brother shot him in the head.’

‘Did you kill him?’ cried Numen.

‘He fell,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘I can say no more than that.’

Septus Thoic at last looked directly at Sharrowkyn. ‘You and I do not see eye to eye, Raven Guard, and we never will, but I thank you for that shot.’

‘Pay Septus no mind,’ said Ignatius Numen loudly, gripping Sharrowkyn’s hand and shaking it hard enough to hurt. ‘Anyone that spills that bastard’s blood is a brother of mine.’

Sharrowkyn nodded his thanks, but kept silent.

‘You’ll be needing to speak to the captain?’ asked Thoic.

‘Yes.’

‘The Frater and Captain Tyro are in there with Tarsa.’

‘*Apothecary* Tarsa,’ said Wayland. ‘He has a rank and you will use it, regardless of his Legion. Is that understood?’

Morlocks were the veterans of the Legion, but even they had to respect the word of an Iron Father. Both warriors nodded and made a fist of their iron left hands.

‘Enter, Iron Father,’ said Thoic, placing his fist against the lock plate and making a complex series of micro-movements with his fingertips. The cog-toothed mechanisms securing the door hissed open and a wave of cold, static-charged air washed over Wayland and Sharrowkyn. They passed through the door and into Captain Ulrach Branthan’s cryonic sanctum, a place of sterile white and silver. A laboratory, a sepulchre, a shrine to mortality and the defiance of time’s passage all in one.

The chamber was an insulated blast-chiller, lined with machinery and floored with thermally shielded cabling, power sources and frost-limned lights that cast their illumination in anti-senesence frequencies. Four figures filled the space: one standing apart with his arms folded across his broad chest, two working on the guts of a machine that even Wayland struggled to understand.

And the fourth…

The standing figure was Cadmus Tyro, a captain and former equerry to Captain Branthan. His hairless head was tanned walnut brown, one eye a cold green augmetic, the other an equally cold haze orb, and his half-mechanised, half-human face was pulled in a permanent grimace of ill-temper. A golden-winged eagle, beyond the ken of the Mechanicum adepts who had studied it, perched on one shoulder, preening its glitter-sheen wings with its razored beak. The mechanised creature had been with Branthan since a foolhardy expedition into the Land of Shadows as a youth, but had since attached itself to Tyro, faithfully watching over its new master.

Branthan called it Garuda, and it had gone into battle many times atop the war standards of the Iron Hands. The crew of the *Sisypheum* simply knew it as ‘the Bird’, and it had survived the Isstvan massacre without so much as a scratch on its golden body. Some said its ancient technologies were beyond the reach of contemporary weapon tech to harm, others that it was simply lucky. More desperate whispers even claimed it was a sign of the Emperor watching over the Legion in these troubled times.

Frater Thamatica knelt with his four servo-arms repairing a chugging coolant unit, as a dozen probes simultaneously worked on multiple components at once. His red cloak was pulled to one side, and the heaviest of his mechanised servo-arms turned a heavy fuel cylinder around, as if looking for a leak or other imperfection that was causing it to function at less than optimal efficiency. Thamatica looked up briefly from his labour and gave Wayland a curt nod, a gesture of respect between Iron Fathers.

Beside the Frater was a warrior in the muted jade of the Salamanders, the ivory heraldry on his shoulder blurred by the accumulation of frost. Atesh Tarsa’s black skin and coal-red eyes were in stark contrast to the monochromatic chamber, almost alien, yet Wayland had found the Salamanders Apothecary to be among the most human of them all.

It had already been decreed that, upon Tarsa’s death, his name should be carved on an iron plaque and hurled into the magma-filled caldera of Mount Karaashi. There it would become part of Medusa itself and the molten metal that

flowed beneath its shifting lands.

No greater honour could be conferred upon a warrior not of the Legion, and Tarsa had accepted the accolade with quiet solemnity. It was an honour well deserved, for the care the Salamanders Apothecary had given the final occupant of the chamber had earned him the undying respect of every Iron Hand aboard.

Encased in a silver casket with a frosted canopy of ice-cold glass lay Ulrach Branthan, Captain of the 65th Company, iron-blooded son of the Nirankar Clan. His body was unmoving, shrouded in motionless streams of freezing vapour. Even through the white mist and frost-webbed glass, Wayland could see the mortal wounds done to Branthan. Both his legs were horribly mutilated, one little more than stringy sinews of ruptured meat and heat-fused bone, the other severed just above the knee.

One arm was held to the body by a splintered nub of bone and tattered scraps of skin. His arm was missing much of its mechanical structure and all but one of the fingers had been broken off in the flight from Isstvan. Branthan's chest was a ruin of four bolter impact craters that ran in a ragged line from hip to sternum.

Under anything approaching normal circumstances, the captain would have been accorded the honour of being interred in a Dreadnought sarcophagus, but such an option was unavailable with their severely limited resources. Brother Bombastus had already demanded the Iron Fathers remove him from his sarcophagus, surrendering his own existence to allow the captain to live again as their only functional Dreadnought. Branthan had graciously declined the offer, knowing that he would never be as fearsome as 'Karaashi' Bombastus, the Iron Thunder of Medusa.

Clamped across the captain's torso like a mechanised arachnid parasite was a glittering device of coiled silver and bronze. Its central mass squatted on his chest, while its segmented appendages encircled his body. Monofilament wires extruded from its multiple limbs wormed their way into the captain's flesh all across his torso, and though it looked painful, Wayland knew the Heart of Iron was all that was keeping Branthan alive.

That and the stasis field generated within his casket.

Tyro turned as Wayland and Sharrowkyn entered, his grim face somehow managing to look grimmer than usual. The cyber-eagle fixed whirring optics on them both, passing their biometric information to him in a series of binaric squawks.

'This had better be worth it, Sabik,' the captain said.

'You know it is,' answered Wayland. Tyro and the other senior officers had

already heard the recording Wayland and Sharrowkyn had made on Hydra Cordatus.

‘It sounds like they’re chasing blind superstition,’ said Tyro. ‘And I don’t like basing a mission on the words of a traitor.’

‘You don’t have to like it,’ said Wayland, tiring of Tyro’s sniping. ‘That *they* believe it is enough, and if there’s any substance to what the Phoenician said, then do you want to risk being wrong? If those weapons exist, we can’t risk Horus getting his hands on them.’

‘He doesn’t have long, you know,’ sighed Tyro, as if Wayland hadn’t spoken. ‘The Heart’s keeping him alive, but it’s killing him too. We’re taking a great risk in bringing him out like this. For all sorts of reasons.’

‘I know that, Cadmus,’ said Wayland. ‘But he needs to hear this.’

‘So you saw Fulgrim and Perturabo?’ boomed Thamatica, finally standing from his work and sweeping his cloak back around him. ‘Shame you didn’t kill them. I’m cooking up a little something that might have helped with that, a thermic displacement beamer. Deadly little thing. Works on the entropic quantum theory of all things existing at all times. If I can get it to work properly, you could swap elements in the heart of a star with a corresponding element of a person. I imagine that would ruin anyone’s day, even a primarch’s.’

‘Sharrowkyn took a shot at Fulgrim,’ said Wayland.

‘Did he now?’ said Thamatica with an appreciative grunt. ‘Didn’t kill him though, I expect.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘We had to leave in a hurry.’

‘Aye, we’re aware of that,’ snapped Tyro. ‘The *Sisypheum* had to make dozens of manoeuvres to avoid detection by the traitor fleet, and you don’t need me to tell you how much fuel that cost us.’

‘You’re right,’ agreed Wayland. ‘I don’t need that. So we should get started.’

Tyro conceded the point and nodded to Thamatica and Atesh Tarsa. ‘How long?’

Apothecary Tarsa consulted a data-slate and said, ‘I would not recommend removing the stasis field for more than a minute. Captain Branthan’s life is limited, even with the Heart of Iron attached.’

‘It’s supposed to heal him, but you say it’s killing him?’ said Sharrowkyn.

‘I understand little of what it is doing to him,’ confessed Tarsa, his voice cultured and precise. ‘It appears to be attempting to regrow some of his major organs, but with each iteration of renewal, his vitals go down across the board. If we were to let time take its course, the captain would be dead before it had

repaired him enough to live.’

‘None of us truly understand its workings,’ said Thamatica. ‘It’s old tech, one of the few pieces left intact after Old Night, much like Branthan’s eagle there. The primarch himself found it during one of his travels into the Land of Shadows.’ Thamatica laughed warily. ‘Said one of the ghost clansmen gave it to him while he hunted the great silver wyrm.’

‘Enough,’ said Tyro. ‘We don’t need another history lesson, Frater.’

‘Ah, youth,’ said Thamatica, addressing Sharrowkyn and unimpressed by Tyro’s brusqueness. ‘They forget that history is the great constant of our species. So much changes, yet so much, sadly, remains the same.’

‘Frater?’ said Tarsa. ‘We’re ready. Brothers Sharrowkyn and Wayland, are you ready?’

Wayland nodded and unclipped the vox-thief from his belt. He plugged the trailing copper wires running from its internal memory coil into a pair of sockets on the side of Captain Branthan’s casket.

‘I’ve compressed the vox-recording into a data blurt,’ he said. ‘Everything we heard will be transferred to Captain Branthan in less than a second. Give the word when his cortical functions are high enough for cognition.’

Tarsa bent to the console controlling the cryo-suspension as Thamatica busied himself with the stasis field. Both men faced each other like mortuary attendants.

‘Raising internal temperatures,’ said Tarsa. ‘Zero point five degrees to one point five on a ten-second gradient.’

‘Disengaging stasis field in five, four, three, two, one. Mark.’

A digital chronometer began counting down the seconds as the mirage-like shimmer enveloping the medicae casket flickered out of existence. A wave of cold spread from it, freezing air kept at bay by a tiny bubble of time taken out of the universe. Wayland alternated his glances between Branthan’s hollowed-out face and the readouts on the monitors. Slow-arcing waves were growing in amplitude as brain activity magnified with the steadily increasing temperature.

Branthan’s eyelids flickered, and the blood oozing from his many wounds flowed sluggishly onto the absorbent mat upon which he lay. The Heart of Iron tightened its grip on his chest, its serpentine arms constricting around his body as though seeking to crush him. More of the monofilament hairs whipped from its glistening limbs and pushed through his hard skin to the organs below.

The captain’s head arched back and a tortured breath escaped him, as though the pain that had been kept at bay renewed its attack with interest. The eagle let out a plaintive squawk at the captain’s renewed signs of life.

‘Now,’ said Tarsa, and Wayland pressed the transmit button on the vox-thief. There was no outward sign that anything had changed, but the panel on the front of the device indicated that the data had been successfully transmitted. All they could do now was wait.

The seconds ticked by and Wayland watched the count reach thirty. The captain’s breath came in short, pain-filled hikes, the flow of blood from his ruined body becoming steadier as his body thawed. Each revivification was taking longer to rouse the captain from his deep hibernation, and it was only a matter of time before he would simply slip away rather than awaken.

‘It’s not working,’ said Cadmus Tyro. ‘Shut it down.’

‘Give it time,’ said Thamatica. ‘Brain activity is increasing.’

‘Temperature at optimal levels,’ said Tarsa, modulating the admixture of stimulants and larraman coagulants being pumped into the captain’s bloodstream.

‘I said shut it down,’ ordered Tyro. ‘He’ll be dead before he reaches consciousness.’

‘We have time,’ said Thamatica.

‘No. You don’t. Re-engage stasis. Now.’

‘*No.*’

‘Ulrach?’ said Cadmus Tyro, and Wayland saw the equerry’s bitter countenance soften at the sound of his friend’s voice. Even artificially rendered through the casket’s augmitters, there was no mistaking the power and authority of the Iron Hands captain. Garuda flapped its metallic wings and perched on the edge of the casket, cawing in welcome. Branthan’s eyes opened, and Wayland’s heart went out to this wounded brother as he saw the sheer effort of will it was taking to maintain his composure in the face of such agony.

‘*Wayland’s recording inloaded. No choice. We go after them. We stop them.*’

Blood flowed freely from Branthan’s wounds. That he was still alive, let alone able to communicate and process information, was a miracle of endurance and fortitude.

‘We don’t even know if there’s any truth to what they were talking about,’ said Tyro.

‘*Irrelevant. Something is there. The traitors want it, so we deny it to them.*’

‘This is your order?’

‘*It is. Make it happen. Upon the anvil*.’

‘And by the Iron,’ finished Tyro. ‘It will be so.’

‘One minute,’ said Tarsa, and a mist of cold air billowed around the casket.

‘Re-engaging stasis field,’ said Thamatica.

‘*Until the next time, broth–*’

Branthan’s words were cut short as he was shut off from the passage of time by the shimmer-haze of the stasis field. The captain’s eagle loosed a cry of machine sorrow and the silence that followed was that shared emptiness at a beloved’s deathbed, leaving each of the Iron Hands wrapped in their own thoughts of mortality, grief and anger.

‘We have our orders,’ said Wayland, as much to break the silence as to say anything of use.

Cadmus Tyro nodded, struggling to mask his emotions and setting his jaw. He exhaled deeply and Wayland was reminded of the decades of friendship that bonded Tyro and Branthan. No easy thing to see a friend in torment, worse if that torment was maintained by your own hand.

‘A damned thing,’ said Thamatica, placing an iron gauntlet on the frozen glass of the casket.

Wayland stepped towards the casket and placed his mechanised hand next to Thamatica’s.

‘We’ll see it done, my captain,’ he said.

Tyro nodded and placed his iron fist next to the silent mech-eagle. ‘Sleep, friend, and know peace while we shoulder your burden.’

The moment passed and, respects paid, the Iron Hands stepped away from their mortally wounded captain.

‘The word is given,’ said Cadmus Tyro at last. ‘We need to keep ahead of the traitors if we’re to stop them, is that understood?’

‘It will be done,’ assured Wayland.

‘And when we get to the warp storm?’ asked Thamatica, addressing Wayland. ‘Can that guide of yours get us through it?’

‘I believe so,’ said Wayland.

‘I don’t like it,’ said Tyro. ‘I spent a lifetime fighting his kind. Can’t trust them.’

‘He knows a way through,’ said Wayland. ‘A secret way known as the Paths Below.’

Once again the Legion captains gathered in the Heliopolis. Fulgrim was to hold court and word was that it would be rapturous. Wounded starlight from the churning warp storm beyond the system’s edge fell in a column through the coffered dome of blood-splashed gold. Lucius had often wondered what secret

debauches had taken place here to have splashed blood so high, and why he had not been part of them.

He contented himself with the delicious images his imagination conjured to fill that lacuna. Reality would only disappoint, so where was the value in knowing the truth? Lucius's twin swords were sheathed at his narrow hips, one a blade Fulgrim had given him in the wake of Isstvan, the other a fractal blade taken from the corpse of a skitarii suzerain on Prismatica.

They were itching to be held, though Lucius told himself that was simply his need to match himself against an opponent of worth. Something sadly lacking within his own Legion. He'd hoped to goad one of the Iron Warriors into a challenge, but even the hulking brute with the temper had looked like poor sport.

The pale, bull-headed statues arranged around the walls were sticky with a fresh layer of death fluids. Blood trails arced in long teardrop sprays that spoke of severed arteries and great violence. The scorched banners were no less defaced, the reminders of the Legion's heritage virtually illegible now and telling nothing of its former allegiance. Lucius wanted to rip them down, to burn them and dance in the flames.

He circled Fulgrim's black throne upon its garish and vulgar plinth of broken stone, remembering a time when he had thought to test his blades against the Phoenician himself. The thought of how he had nearly fallen into the primarch's trap gave him a delicious frisson that few things could in these bland days. His mouth went dry at the memory of watching the captains of the Legion in battle against Fulgrim in the Gallery of Swords aboard the *Andronicus*.

They had believed Fulgrim to be something other than he appeared and had captured him, intending to inflict the most sublime pain to drive out whatever had infested their primarch's body. It had been a ruse, of course, the Phoenician's perverse way of testing their devotion; self-indulgent theatre to flaunt his power and reveal his true purpose to his devoted warriors.

Those warriors were gathered around him, arranged without heed for old ranks or former position. All that now mattered to the Emperor's Children was that sensation be indulged, that every experience be wrung dry of indulgent excess. The archaic terminology of rank was slowly becoming a thing of the past. Lucius regarded each one in turn, imagining them coming at him with weapons unsheathed and picturing how he might despatch each one with a single blow.

Julius Kaesoron circled in opposition to him. The Favoured Son, as he was now known, avoided his gaze with a fixedness that made Lucius smile. His face was cut with fresh recasting, moulding his features into a nightmarish pastiche of

humanity, a mask of flesh transfigured beyond all sanity by bone grafts, horn implants and ocular components that had reshaped his eyes into too-wide orbs of utter blackness.

Marius Vairosean and his Kakophoni basked in the shrieking discordia blaring from the ceiling mounted vox-casters. The screams of Isstvan V had been replaced with the music composed by Bequa Kynska for her great *Maraviglia*, suitably amplified, distorted and reworked by the primarch himself. Its shrieking cadence was a rare note of stimulation, and Lucius paused a moment to listen to the jagged spikes of music that jangled and tore at his senses. Its violence was diverting, but the armoured bodies of the Kakophoni jerked and danced like the marionettes of a demented puppeteer, their bizarre sonic weaponry crackling and throbbing as they absorbed the potency of the diabolical sounds.

Krysander of the Blades stood immobile, his pouting expression hardened at having been summoned from his chamber of terror and flesh brutalising. His hooked tongue licked cracked lips, putting Lucius in mind of a basking lizard too far from water. The daggers thrust through the flesh sheaths of his bare chest and thighs made him look like some pre-Unity techno-barbarian warlord, an impression only enhanced by the cloak of razor thorns tearing at his back.

The hooks and rings piercing the face of Kalimos were linked by taut chains that would prick and tear the flesh in new and exotic ways with each word he spoke. Idly, Lucius wondered which words would cause Kalimos the most pain, and resolved never to say anything that would give him cause to voice them. To deny Kalimos his desired pain gave Lucius a moment of pleasure, but it vanished a heartbeat later, as ephemeral and fleeting as most such petty amusements.

Lonomia Ruen and Bastarnae Abranxe stood together, the latter having transferred his blood affections from the dead Heliton to the venom-master. Ruen’s armour was festooned with daggers and razor spikes, each coated in one of his many amusingly lethal toxins. Abranxe wore his twin swords in imitation of Lucius, and the idea that his skill with a blade was even close to matching his was laughable. The scar Lucius had given him as a reminder of that fact was now hidden beneath a tattoo.

Fulgrim swept into the Heliopolis with a fanfare of shrieking slaves crawling before him, a roiling carpet of flesh to be crushed underfoot by the primarch’s titanic strides. They pulled and clawed at one another to feel the primarch’s killing weight upon them as it snapped their bones and pulped their organs, each skeletal slave howling in pleasure as it died. Fabius trailed in the primarch’s wake, his monstrous Chirurgeon clicking and snapping like a living thing, and

his appearance made Lucius want to kill something. Two hooded figures marched on either side of the Apothecary. One Lucius recognised as the eldar guide, but his interest was piqued at the sight of the second. He had the bulk of a legionary, but moved with the shuffling gait of a sleepwalker or a cripple.

'My sons,' said Fulgrim, ascending to his throne with a single bound and leaving his hooded companions at the foot of its rubble plinth. 'Everything I desire is within our grasp. We are a step closer to realising my dream of the City of Mirrors and seeing the reflection of the Angel Exterminatus looking back at us.'

Clad in armour of gold and purple, Fulgrim wore his long white hair braided into painful-looking cornrows and a single scalp lock with a silver blade woven into its end. A patchwork pelisse of draconic scale, torn from the bodies of dead Salamanders, hung from his left shoulder, while a quilt of midnight black feathers draped his right. A mosaic of ivory chips that had once been the iconography upon the armour of Ferrus Manus formed an eagle upon the primarch's breastplate, one with both heads sagging upon broken necks.

'Perturabo has aligned his Legion with us, and his warriors will storm the gates of hell to bring about the apotheosis whispered of in the farthest corners of the warp,' said Fulgrim, and his warriors cheered themselves hoarse in adoration. Fulgrim basked in their devotion, feeding on their love with an indulgent smile that did not include them.

The primarch lifted his hands to his head, placing his fingertips just below the marks on his temple, one an entry wound, the other a scar where Fabius had dug the needle from his skull.

'Though my brother's help was not won without cost,' said Fulgrim with a winning smile. 'I had to allow our enemies to shoot me in the head to secure it. Ah, with such unsubtle wiles do we ensnare the foolish and the naïve.'

The Emperor's Children roared, yet Lucius felt himself curiously detached from the cheering, as though Fulgrim's plans were an irrelevance.

'And when Perturabo realises you have lied to him? What then?'

Lucius searched for the source of the voice, and was shocked to find it was his own.

The words had sprung unbidden from his throat and the thrilling surge of blood around his body was like a powerful burst of adrenaline straight to the heart. He heard a savage intake of breath from the Legion warriors around him, and resisted the urge to draw his swords. It felt as though the words had been placed in his skull, and burst forth of their own volition.

‘Lucius,’ purred Fulgrim. ‘Always the spiteful remark and the barb that steals my thunder.’

‘My lord,’ said Lucius. ‘I don’t know–’

‘And I had such high hopes for you,’ said Fulgrim, descending the rubble slopes of the plinth. Lucius had already seen that to draw blades against Fulgrim would be to die, but the urge to bare his steel was almost irresistible.

‘I don’t know where those words came from, my lord,’ said Lucius.

‘Hush, Lucius, it’s all right. I know,’ said Fulgrim.

‘You do?’

‘There is nothing I do not know of my Legion, Lucius. Remember that, always. To forget is to risk grave consequences. Isn’t that right, Eidolon?’

At first Lucius thought he’d misheard. He couldn’t have heard the name his primarch had just said. Fulgrim must have bestowed the late Lord Commander’s name upon another.

‘Behold the Risen One!’ cried Fulgrim, pulling back the hood of the robed figure who had entered with Fabius. A collective gasp of astonishment swept around the Heliopolis at the sight of the warped features, the stretched-out jaw and the face of a warrior thought dead at the hands of the primarch himself.

Lord Commander Eidolon threw off his robes, revealing his armoured form, gleaming and painted in neon colours that offended the eye. Barbs of coiled wire trailed scraps of hessian from his shoulder guards, and his mighty hammer was slung in a looping series of bandoleer straps that buckled in a slash of leather across his chest. A raw suture ran the circumference of his neck in a perfectly even line.

His skin was the colour of faded parchment, his eyes black and glassy, dead like a doll’s. He limped towards Lucius, a lipless grin splitting his already too-wide mouth. Lucius felt his skin crawl at the sight of a dead man walking, repulsed and exhilarated at the same time.

‘Surprised to see me, swordsman?’ gurgled Eidolon.

‘I saw you die,’ he replied. ‘I drank wine mixed with your blood and spinal fluid.’

‘And yet I live.’

Lucius laughed. ‘That is life? You can barely walk and if I drew my sword, I’d cut you down before you’d get that stupidly big hammer free.’

‘I need no hammer to kill the likes of you,’ said Eidolon. ‘The things I can do now–’

Even before the last word was out of Eidolon’s mouth, Lucius had both swords

drawn and the blades resting crossed on either side of the Lord Commander's gorget.

'I'll cut that head off for good this time,' said Lucius.

'Hush, my sons,' said Fulgrim, clearly enjoying this reunion of old enemies. 'Eidolon yet lives because I desire it so. He has a part to play in ensuring the City of Mirrors is built to my exacting specifications. Now lower your blades.'

Lucius nodded and spun his swords, ramming them back into their thigh sheaths.

Fabius stepped forwards and said, 'Thanks to my ministrations, the Lord Commander's body will regain its former strength and more in time. Pray I might do the same for you one day, swordsman.'

Lucius laughed in the Apothecary's face. 'Save your breath, Fabius. No one's going to kill me, not in this lifetime or any other. They wouldn't dare.'

'They will,' said Fulgrim, with a knowing wink. 'One day they will, but like Eidolon, you will rise again, my beloved son. Though your rebirth will be somewhat more enjoyable, I think. For you, at least.'

Emboldened by his continued survival and Fulgrim's cryptic words of a future beyond this moment, Lucius ignored Eidolon's baleful stare and said, 'Then I ask again, my lord. What happens when Perturabo finds out you have lied to him?'

Fulgrim moved to stand in the centre of the Heliopolis until his body was limned by the poisonous light of the warp storm's grotesque eye. He spread his arms wide, the draconic scale and raven feathers billowing around him like two almighty wings in a sourceless wind.

'By the time my dull brother realises the truth it will be too late for him,' said Fulgrim in the sickly light that sloughed from him like a serpent's skin. 'The *maugetar* stone will have done its work and I will have what I want. And the Angel Exterminatus will arise from the flames of his death.'

BOOK TWO

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

Theogonies – II

He was alive, and that stark fact alone surprised him. Cylindrical walls of buckled silver encircled him, a capsule of metal that he had no memory of being placed within. Light streamed through a large tear on one side of the tube, shimmering and inconstant, like sunlight reflected from the surface of a tidal lake. He had never seen a lake, but knew instinctively what one would look like, how the cold waters would feel on his skin and the sense of freedom that would come from swimming the blue-green depths.

He unsnapped a number of trailing cables from his body and turned himself around in the cramped confines of the tube. As he crawled along to the break in the walls, he caught sight of his reflection in the smooth walls of his…

His what?

His prison, his refuge or his home?

No, none of those words felt right.

His features were those of a powerful man – youthful, but one to whom others would willingly bend the knee. The jaw was square, the hair dark as midnight, his eyes a warm, gold-flecked green. It was the face of a man upon whose shoulders great burdens could be placed without fear of them being unseated.

He liked the face, pleased at how it had been wrought.

He was naked, but the absence of clothes did not trouble him. He knew nothing of modesty and took a moment to admire the perfection of his godlike physique. He laughed at the vanity of the thought, and with the grin of a man who knows the world is at his feet, pushed at the damaged section of the curved silver walls. The material was soft and pliant to his touch, and he easily bent the honeycombed structure open enough to allow him egress. He boosted himself up and climbed from the reflective interior like a newborn from a glittering chrysalis.

He dropped to the ground, and stared in wonder at his surroundings.

He stood within a vast crater – a hundred kilometres wide at least – deep in the belly of what had once been a colossal mountain of black rock and ice. The crater was a forest of spiral-fluted stalagmites, its floor webbed with cracks

through which scalding vents of steam billowed and spurts of molten rock jetted. The heat was incredible, and warm rain misted the air; ice as it toppled into the crater, liquid as it fell, steam before it reached the bottom.

Towering cliffs soared a thousand metres above him, and cascades of ice-bearded rock fell into the crater from the splintered rim. Billowing clouds of dust and smoke obscured the sky and the mountain groaned and shook with seismic tremors.

His arrival had caused this; he was sure of it.

The walls of the cliffs were a curious mix of translucent ice, embedded metal and broken structural arches, all veined with millions of silver threads that trembled like imprisoned fireflies. Golden pulses of bioluminescence travelled the network, like misfiring synapses in a damaged brain. The glittering light shimmered all around him, like newborn suns in a crystal sky.

It was quite the most beautiful thing he could ever have imagined.

Tearing his eyes from the magnificent vista of the crater, he took a moment to inspect the capsule from which he had emerged. Exactly nine metres long and crumpled with its terrific impact upon the mountain, its surfaces were stencilled with symbols he did not yet understand and embedded with jewels that winked with their own internal light.

Where had the capsule come from?

Was its presence here deliberate or an accident?

Boxy devices on its upper surfaces trailed a profusion of wires and ribbed tubing. They drooled clear fluids that smelled of chemicals and exotic elements he could not name. His eyes were drawn to a brushed iron plate beneath a circular window ringed with heavy metal seals and thick rivets.

Upon the plate was a single letter: X.

No, not a letter. A representation of the number ten.

And with that recognition came thoughts of others. Were there more like him?

He had no recall of any such brotherhood, but knew on the deepest, most primal level, that he was part of something greater than himself. United in purpose, vying for primacy, he was strong.

Alone, he was nothing.

Shaking off a self-pitying sense of loneliness, he studied the crater once again, letting details he had previously glossed over come to the fore. One thing was immediately apparent: this was no natural formation of rock within the mountain, its shape too geometric and its arrangement too precisely symmetrical to have formed naturally. He watched the play of light through the walls, seeing

a pattern in its ostensibly random movement, a pattern that was now disrupted.

The heart of that pattern led to the centre of the crater, where he saw hints of an angular structure nestled between the curling stalagmites. He set off towards it, his strides long and sure, confident to the point of arrogance. He closed the distance rapidly, weaving between cracks of superheated gases and bubbling streams of molten rock burping to the surface.

The closer he came to the centre, the more cracks split the ground and the more detours he had to take. As he paused atop a fallen spire, he surveyed the ground close to the structure, now seeing complex concentric patterns cut into the rock around it. He could make no sense of them, sweeping arcs with cursive runic forms between them. They were not language, that much he could tell, but what purpose they served was a mystery.

Many were split by the cracks, others still were being burned away by ribbons of liquid rock that hissed and steamed as they oozed from unseen magma vents below. Though he had no conscious knowledge of such things, he knew that this entire crater was in danger of collapsing into a seething caldera of lava, that its stability had rested on the mountaintop remaining intact.

The structure itself was a low, boxy thing, apparently solid with no visible means of gaining entry. It was clearly important; why else would someone go to the trouble of depositing it in such an inaccessible place?

He continued onwards, winding through the stalagmites that thronged the floor of the crater like silent sentinels. He brushed a hand across one as he passed, feeling a tingling charge coursing through it. An electro-conductive crystalline lattice, perhaps? He crossed the concentric lines of runic symbols, feeling a strange, prickling sensation as he did so. It invigorated him, as though a wellspring of vitality had opened up inside him.

The heat in the crater was rising steadily, and more and more rocky debris was falling from the rim above. The mountain’s flanks were collapsing inwards like a sculpture of sand being slowly eaten away by the tide. He would need to leave soon or risk being buried.

Eventually he reached the structure at the heart of the crater. As he had suspected, there was no visible means of entry, its walls glossy black and without any seams, joints or imperfections in its surface. For all intents and purposes, it was a solid block. A stone awaiting a sculptor, a dream waiting to be given form.

Or a nightmare…

A sudden crack echoed like a gunshot, and he backed away as a prescient

sense of danger settled in his gut. He saw a forking tracery of silver light crack the featureless stone, moving like an upturned lightning bolt through the block. Another crazed the corner nearest to him, quickly followed by a third. A fourth and a fifth webbed the surface. He knew he should get as far from here as possible, but he had to know what had been hidden in this secret place.

More and more cracks were spreading over the structure, linking together and shining phosphor-bright. He shielded his eyes as the block radiated light like a supernova. With a final boom, it fell apart and what lay within was revealed.

Through the brilliant, mercurial haze of impossibly bright silver light, he saw a form cohering in the radiance. Segmented and coiled, it was a disassembled entity that was only now able to restore its original form. A swirling lattice of architecture and organism, construct and intelligence, it was at once a living thing and an artificially wrought monster.

A hideous steel clattering of bio-mechanical gears and liquid metal rattled through the cavern, an artificial heartbeat and birth-shout in one. He saw a huge worm-like creature uncoiling from its dissolving prison. Hearing that terrible mechanised shriek of release, there could be no doubt that this monster had been imprisoned within this impregnable mountain.

Reaching down, he scooped up a sharpened shard of mirror-smooth black rock. A crude weapon, but it would have to do. He stepped out to face the creature, a titanic wyrm with a ratcheting, segmented body that constantly rotated and reshaped itself with shifting liquid ease. Its bulbous, arachnid exo-skull was wreathed in metallic feelers, a trio of needle-toothed proboscises and multi-faceted eyes that reflected a million images of the naked figure before it. The great wyrm reared up, a towering monster of chromed steel, and loosed a howling bray of machine anger.

He leapt to the side as the creature slammed its bulk down, crushing the ruin of its former prison and cracking the ground beneath with its titanic weight. He rolled, burning his skin on the patches of molten rock bubbling up through the cracks. Scalding steam wreathed him and he bit back a shout of pain.

The towering wyrm slithered towards him, smashing stalagmites from its path and gouging a great furrow in the ground with its weight. With only his shard-blade to defend himself, he was under no illusion as to what the outcome of the fight could be.

He roared and leapt at the creature, stabbing his obsidian blade into its flanks, but the stone shattered on its glittering armour. It slammed into him, a flexing juggernaut of thunderous, unstoppable metal and power. Silver barbs pierced his

skin as he was flung from its path, slicing his chest and shoulders to ruin. He hit the ground hard, the breath punched out of him, his body bruised to the bone. He pushed himself to one knee, ready to face the creature once more. Even weaponless, he would fight it.

But it seemed that killing him was of no concern to the wyrm. It continued over the floor of the cavern, bludgeoning a path through to the cliffs. Again it reared up and hundreds of grasping, clawed legs extruded from the underside of its body. With sinuous flexes, the wyrm creature tore its way up the disintegrating walls until it curled around and slithered over the lip of the crater.

He stood and watched it go, relieved to be alive, but angry he had failed to kill the beast. He knew nothing of his past, but the power of his body told him he was more than a mere man. He had failed in this first task, and swore to himself that he would not fail again. His arrival had destroyed this mountain prison, however unwittingly, and the responsibility of undoing the damage lay with him.

The trail of destruction left by the creature led to the base of the cliff. Its climb had left the rock gouged and torn with hand- and footholds, which would make the climb possible.

Possible, yet still incredibly dangerous and difficult.

With every second he delayed, the wyrm put ever more distance between them, and so he gripped the cliff face and began climbing. Hand over hand, with the relentless strokes of a machine, he climbed the cliff. It was not an easy climb; the rock had been greatly weakened by the wyrm’s passage. It took two gruelling hours, but finally he reached the lip of the crater and hauled himself out. His muscles burned with exertion and his chest heaved for breath. He dropped to his knees, resting his bloodied hands on the ground as he took in great gulps of icy, dust-clogged air.

Shards of the wyrm’s scales littered the edge of the crater and he lifted one, thinking to use it as a weapon. He turned it over in his hands, surprised at how light it was. The edge was razor sharp, and when he caught a glimpse of his reflection he let out a gasp of surprise.

Where once his eyes had been an inviting gold-flecked green, now they were a shimmering silver, like coins placed on the eyes of the dead. He lifted a hand to his face, seeing the web of veins and incandescent blood beneath the skin, the artistry that had gone into their construction and the miraculous bio-engineered wonders encoded within his flesh.

Was this a side effect of the wyrm’s attack or was he now perceiving the world as he had always been intended to see it? Strangely, the sight of his new eyes did

not trouble him overmuch, and he rose to his feet with fresh purpose.

The wyrm's passage was impossible to miss, a deep furrow in the mountainside that led north into a shadowy wasteland. Watery light glinted from the creature's distant scales as it fled its former tomb. Beyond the wyrm, he saw the broken outlines of what looked like a collection of ruined towers, obviously ancient and perhaps belonging to a long-dead, long-vanished culture.

The sulphurous skies over the horizon were a striated mess of bruise yellow and infection red. Storm clouds wheeled and clashed, and distant lightning split the air with thunderclap booms. Only a weak, diffuse light broke through the clouds. A smear of light illuminated the southern haunches of the mountain directly below him, and he saw a number of primitive vehicles crossing the southern steppe in the far distance, a great caravan train pulled by mammoth grey-skinned beasts of burden. The landscape the caravan traversed was barren and hostile, black sands and rocky hinterlands swept by dust storms and freezing winds, a grim place to call home.

They were made tiny by distance, but he could make out bent-backed men swathed in furs and heavy leather cloaks driving the mighty beasts. To see other living beings sent a pang of longing through him, a surging relief that he was no longer alone.

He wanted to go to them, to learn where he was and who they were, but he had sworn to see the wyrm creature destroyed.

He would not make his first act upon reaching the surface one of oath-breaking.

He turned his back on the men of this world, and followed the trail of the wyrm into the cold black sands of the north.

NINE

La Fenice Reborn

Methodology

A God of the Battlefield

Wonder and light had returned to *La Fenice* after a lightless gloom of abandonment. Its doors were flung wide and the perfumed breath of the *Pride of the Emperor* allowed to sigh in once more, like air into collapsed lungs. It heaved with life and magic, a rapturous rebirth now that the III Legion was restored to its true purpose. Harsh lumens banished shadow and heat-belching flambeaux imparted warmth to the setting, pleasing Fulgrim mightily.

The Phoenician wandered through the industry filling the theatrical space, sculptors re-imagining the nymph statues worked into the columns as sinuous pleasure maidens. They carved from memory, conjuring the blissful horror of the handmaidens of profligacy with rasp and chisel. They were crude representations, and Fulgrim had to resist the urge to beat them aside and complete the work himself.

Clad in a flowing crimson robe lined with a constantly rearranging mixture of barbs, silks and puckered cephalopod flesh, Fulgrim toured the work being carried out like a master mason supervising the completion of his legacy. His sword hilt protruded from his robes, and though its blade no longer held the shard of the creature that had shown him the darkest secrets of the galaxy, it was still a touchstone bauble to him.

The sentimentality of the thought amused Fulgrim, and he craned his neck upwards.

Imprisoned within its elaborate frame of gold and cold iron, his mirror image stared back at him with undisguised hatred. Though it was impossible ever to see the expression on the painting change – automated pict viewers had tried and failed – all it took was the briefest glance away for the painted face to render some new emotion in the oils and acrylics and other… more exotic materials that

had gone into its creation. Armoured in his distinctive violet and gold, the Fulgrim in the painting was a divine being, a warrior at the height of his strength and power. Charismatic and beloved, sure and certain of his purpose.

All of it a lie.

Fulgrim could barely remember a time when that had been him. He barely recognised the figure staring down at him. He could wear that selfsame armour, arrange his hair, his features and his body in exactly the same manner, and there would still be no likening the two.

'It's all in the eyes, you see,' he said.

'My lord?'

'Thinking aloud, my Favoured Son,' said Fulgrim, turning to address his companions: Julius Kaesoron, Marius Vairosean and Eidolon.

He looked up again. 'Admiring the work of one of our former companions.'

'The artist woman?' asked Kaesoron, his words deliciously mangled by the disfigurements wrought on the battlefield and upon Fabius's slab.

'Serena D'Angelus,' said Fulgrim, leaning down to whisper in Kaesoron's ear. 'She quite literally put her body and soul into this piece. Her fevered blood, her carnal sweat and all her anguished tears too. Many others contributed their excretions to her unique blend of pigments, though perhaps not as willingly as she herself.'

'I don't like it,' said Marius Vairosean, picking through the ruins of the orchestra pit, where he had been reborn to his true calling. The halberd-like device strapped to his back growled with a throbbing bass hum, as though remembering its birth as a weapon in this place of vibrant madness.

'You don't like it?' asked Fulgrim. 'Why is that?'

Marius wouldn't look up, and Fulgrim gripped his chin with spiteful strength and wrenched his distorted face to look up at the painting. The leader of the Kakophoni grunted in pain as Fulgrim's sharpened nails cut his throat open. He gurgled phlegm and blood.

'It isn't you,' growled Marius through his reshaped jaws. 'I do not like any images of you. They can never *be* you, so they are all an insult to your radiance.'

'A good answer,' said Fulgrim, releasing him. 'Though I fear an incomplete one. You torment yourself over your misguided attempt to exorcise the daemon from my flesh. You hate that you doubted me, Marius. Good, that is as it should be. Revel in that sensation. Feed it and feel it twist in the gut like a worm gnawing your innards. Trust me, Marius, good guilt should not be squandered.'

'As you will it, my lord,' said Marius, and his sonic weapon squalled and

barked in dissonant screeches.

Fulgrim watched as Legion warriors daubed the walls with furious brushstrokes, colours and patterns that would be offensive and sickening to less evolved eyes. Though it looked random, there was a precise order to it all. Every colour, every pattern and every last facet of this rebirth had been orchestrated and designed by Fulgrim, and not one droplet of paint was left to dry that had not been carefully placed.

Its previous incarnation had been decorated and adorned by the remembrancers – a veritable horde of artists, poets and sculptors – but none now remained alive to continue that work. The imperatives of the Lords of Profligacy were harsh upon the flesh of the weak, breaking their bodies and minds after only the briefest dalliance on the path to sensation. Mortal frames were weak, but the Legions had been built for unending war and were engineered to endure all manner of punishments and pleasures.

The perfect devotees of the Dark Prince.

Shattered reflections bounced back and forth across the proscenium and the elevated boxes, where those who had gained the primarch's favour would gather to watch the forthcoming performances. Thousands of glittering shards taken from the giant crystal forests of Prismatica had been brought to *La Fenice*, and set within the walls, ceiling and floor of the theatre.

'And he shall build a glorious city of mirrors: a city of mirages, at once solid and liquid, at once air and stone,' said Fulgrim.

'The city of mirrors?' said Eidolon, tapping a finger against the glass. 'Is that what this is?'

Fulgrim shook his head in irritation. 'Don't be foolish, Eidolon. I brought you back to build it for me. Have you played any part in *this* work?'

'No, my lord.'

'Ah, but I forget,' said Fulgrim, spinning and placing an arm around Eidolon's shoulder. 'You weren't alive for my grand soliloquy upon the stage after Julius and Marius here tried to torture a supposed daemon from my body, little realising I had already cast it out.'

Fulgrim released Eidolon and his lip curled in distaste at the Lord Commander's awkward gait. Though his limb control had improved markedly since his restoration, Eidolon's body was still an unpleasant collection of jerky tics and awkward movements. Fulgrim was put in mind of a poor puppeteer's performance.

'Your walk is ugly and foolish,' said Fulgrim. 'You move like a greenskin. It

offends me, and I do not wish to see it. Stay behind me until you can perambulate with some grace.'

'Yes, my lord,' rasped Eidolon, retreating in the face of Fulgrim's ire.

'Perhaps I left it too long to retrieve your shrivelled head from that emptied barrel of victory wine,' said Fulgrim. He shook his head and smiled. 'No, the fault lies with Fabius and his imperfect work. Remind me to punish him for making you stupid and ugly.'

'If this is not to be the city of mirrors, then what is?' asked Kaesoron.

Fulgrim rounded on his favoured son. 'All in good time, Julius. I will not be rushed. This is to be my moment of greatest triumph, and you want me to just blurt out the awesome majesty of what I intend? You are an idiot child with no appreciation of true drama. I will reveal what is to come when it best suits me, my sons, not before. I want to savour the look on everyone's face when they see what is to be wrought in the heart of the star maelstrom.'

'Apologies, my lord,' said Kaesoron, but Fulgrim waved away his contrition.

'You are beginning to bore me,' said Fulgrim, pausing to admire his reflection in a cracked pane of crystal. He smiled as he saw the painting above him in the depths of the glass, its expression murderous. Fulgrim licked his full lips, but the smile fell from his face as he saw something in the corner of the shard.

A towering figure in black armour, with eyes and hands of shimmer-steel silver.

He spun around, searching the far corners of *La Fenice* for any sign of this intruder.

Nothing – for there was nothing to see. Ferrus Manus was dead, and the daemon in the painting had no power over him.

'Show yourself!' bellowed Fulgrim, drawing his golden sword as all eyes turned towards him in shock. 'I killed you once, and I can do it again, brother!'

He lurched drunkenly through the theatre, staring into each shard of glass and every polished surface. In each of them, he saw the hulking outline of the Gorgon, a silent figure watching from the shadows. He smashed them with thunderous punches, his fists red and bloody with splintered shards of crystal by the time he had finished.

Fulgrim halted in his rampage and let out a shuddering breath. His warriors watched him in shock and surprise, wary of being the first to break their silence. His hands ached, but the pulsing waves of pain were welcome sensation that helped focus his mind. Ferrus was not here. Ferrus was dead. This was just shadow play, the result of his exertions and the strain of dealing with a dullard

like Perturabo. His head ached. It felt like it was being steadily crushed in an engineer's vice. He needed diversion, he needed release from the dark thoughts building in his mind like toxic fluids.

'I am leaving,' he said. 'Send a trepannixor to my chamber, I need my skull drilled.'

'As you wish, my lord,' said Marius. 'Is there anything else we can do for you?'

Fulgrim blinked away a shimmering after-image of his dead brother and nodded.

'Yes,' he said. 'Tell me, does the Brotherhood of the Phoenix still gather?'

Kaesoron shook his head. 'The ashen order has not gathered since Isstvan.'

'Re-establish it,' said Fulgrim.

'My lord?'

'Alone, you are solitary voices in praise of the Dark Prince; together you shall be a mighty choir,' said Fulgrim, in the grandiose tones of a heroic actor. 'To gild refined gold, to paint the lily, to throw perfume on the violet, to smooth the ice, to add another hue unto the rainbow or with taper-light to seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish… these are the grandest arts, the sublime crafts that glorify all the manifold paths to perfect excess.'

Seeing their confusion, Fulgrim allowed them this one indulgence. '*La Fenice* is reborn, but it needs purpose. Fill it with debauches and prayers to self-gratification in all its forms. Leave no perversion, no bloodlust, no expression and no degradation untapped. Let blood and better run free and let the heavens shake with your devotions.'

'As you wish,' said Kaesoron. 'I will see to it.'

'As will I,' said Marius.

Fulgrim let out a shuddering breath as he looked up at the painting once more.

'If you are lurking here, brother, then spend your time learning of what we have become and weep…' he hissed. 'But make no mistake, I will have what I want.'

But you will forever lose what you once had, whispered a voice in his mind.

The Sisypheum was not a large ship, yet its armaments and warrior complement were easily capable of bringing truculent worlds to heel by its very presence. Compact and deadly, the Iron Hands vessel still bore the scars of its flight from Isstvan and its subsequent battles in the northern marches. The black, non-reflective hull was pitted with the impact shrapnel from explosive ordnance

launched to cripple her, for the heavier traitor cruisers to finish off. Those wounds hadn't slowed the *Sisypheum*, and damage that would have gutted a vessel of almost any other Legion had been shrugged off and its pursuers evaded as every Iron Hand aboard fought to keep it flying.

Every warrior bent his back to the task, and never was a crew more dedicated and devoted to its ship. Hull breaches were sealed in moments, deck fires extinguished the instant they began and shield generators repaired as soon as they overloaded. The *Sisypheum* was the ship that simply *would not die*.

Up-armoured and with a hull that had been repaired more times than any shipwright would dream, it was not a graceful vessel, nor even a handsome one. Its blunt form was that of an attack dog that had met one too many foes its equal, but which had yet managed to give as good as it got.

Death Guard, Sons of Horus, Word Bearers and Iron Warriors had all taken their best shot at destroying the *Sisypheum*, but it had eluded them all or fought to keep the traitors at bay long enough to escape whatever net was closing in. A Night Lords vessel had come closest to ending its defiance of the odds stacked against it, but soon the hunted became the hunter, employing tactics no one would have expected from an Iron Hands captain.

A Raven Guard captain, perhaps, but the X Legion fought with brutal directness, not with subtlety and subterfuge. Hadn't Isstvan V shown the forces loyal to Horus that simple, undeniable fact?

Yet the VIII Legion's *Tenebraxis* suddenly found itself outmanoeuvred and its rear quarters raked by a vessel it should have reduced to a guttering, flame-blackened hulk in a matter of minutes. Left wallowing and defenceless, the *Tenebraxis* was boarded by kill teams of Iron Hands who took the fight to the enemy in their shadowed halls and darkened companionways, stripping it of anything potentially useful for refitting and repair work.

Leaving the stricken ship burning in the ice floes of the Isstvan cometary belt, the *Sisypheum* fled the system, finding the closest point to the gravipause and making an emergency warp-jump to distant systems. With the supplies liberated from the enemy vessel, it was reinforced, upgraded and made even more lethal than before.

Like the warriors it carried, it proudly bore the scars of battle on its armour.

Like them, it was a weapon.

Frater Thamatica's laboratorium, like every other space where dangerous machinery operated and high-energy experiments were undertaken, was situated

on the upper levels of the *Sisypheum*. The modular nature of these compartments was such that each one could be vented into space, or even ejected whole, in the event of an emergency. In his time as an Iron Father, Frater Thamatica had ejected six compartments from various starships. A lot by some people's reckoning; not as many as it could have been by his own.

This particular compartment ran fully a quarter of the length of the *Sisypheum*, a research space of arched buttresses angled up from the hull-side edge to a spinal mezzanine viewing area where observers could watch the employment of experimental weaponry and fissile reactor burns in relative safety. The space was filled with stacked crates taken from the *Tenebraxis*, a collection of materiel yet to be catalogued and put to better use. Heavy generator equipment was bolted to the ironwork deck, and coiled power couplings looped across the walls and hung from the ceiling like jungle creepers or lounging snakes.

A bitter electrical taste flavoured the air at a frequency that set teeth on edge and produced an insistent buzz like an insect trapped in glass. Servitors marched to and fro, bearing containers of heavy tools, machine components and artificer-crafted items that few beyond the Iron Fraternity would recognise.

Thamatica worked back and forth between two monstrous generator units, dragging heavy insulated cables behind him and arranging them in long spirals before hooking them up. Each cable was thick and heavy, and he grunted with the effort of hauling them into the desired position.

'You know you could have servitors do that for you,' said Wayland, descending the elevator from the mezzanine. Thamatica looked up at the sight of him, and his bearded face broke out in a grin of welcome.

'True,' said Thamatica. 'But I find it therapeutic to get my hands dirty in the workshop now and again, don't you? And if something were to go wrong, I'd not know which of the servitors to blame. This way, if something *does* go wrong, at least I'll know it's something *I've* done.'

'You think it likely that something will go wrong?'

Thamatica shrugged. 'Always possible. Adds a certain excitement to proceedings, I find.'

He finished connecting up the cable he held and wiped the back of his hand over his forehead, where two golden studs were embedded above a red one. Wayland also boasted a red stud above his right eye, a symbol of his tenure on Mars learning the credo of machines from the Mechanicum, yet he only boasted a single golden stud.

It was entirely possible that Frater Thamatica was now the longest-serving

Iron Father left alive in the Legion.

‘I try to keep excitement out of my experiments,’ said Wayland.

Thamatica looked genuinely puzzled.

‘Frater Thamatica,’ said Wayland, extending his left hand. ‘Strength of Iron be yours.’

‘Frater Wayland,’ replied Thamatica, gripping Wayland’s polished gauntlet with his oil-stained one. ‘Fire of the Forge empower you.’

The mechanised fingers of their iron gauntlets wrapped around one another, intertwining and locking together in a complex Gordian knot of extruded probes and friction gears. Through that grip, their mechanised internal systems shared data freely, a meeting of minds as well as physical presence.

Thamatica freed his gauntlet and said, ‘So what brings you to my workshop today?’

‘Professional curiosity,’ said Wayland.

‘Another mission with our Raven Guard friend? I don’t know that I can work up any more stasis generators. Captain Branthan’s casket is intensive in its demands, and you already have my most reliable teleport homer.’

Wayland shook his head. ‘I’m not here to requisition. I wanted to see this thermic displacement beamer you were telling me about when we came to see Captain Branthan. If you have time?’

‘Time, young Sabik?’ boomed Thamatica. ‘I’m working on the thing right now. I could use your help too.’

‘I’d be honoured.’

Thamatica grinned and pointed to the other end of the cable he’d been hauling. ‘Plug that cable into the generator at the end of the row, and be careful not to bring it into contact with any of the collimated spirals, there’s enough charge in them to blow a hole in the side of the ship. In theory, at least.’

‘These are all live?’

‘Of course.’

‘Wouldn’t it be better to leave the generators off while you connect them all?’

‘And lose vital hours while I wait for them to power up? No, if I can get this to work, then we will have a powerful weapon to deploy against our enemies. Time and rebellion wait for no man, after all.’

Wayland sighed and dragged the dense cable along the floor towards the waiting generator, its magnetic whine of internal rotors and coil blades lifting micro-fragments of weapon impacts from his armour in a glittering mist. He hooked the cable into its socket with some effort – the interface was complex

with multiple connectors – and locked it in place with a satisfying crunch of engaging clamps.

‘It is ready,’ he called over to Thamatica, who nodded from the centre of his nest of control consoles.

Wayland made his way back to Thamatica, careful to avoid the buzzing cables and the crackling arcs of spitting electricity that waved like strobing neon fronds. He took station at a spot indicated by Thamatica, and studied the readings cascading down the many archaic-looking screens. Most were framed in wood or soft metals, like something from the palace reliquary or the Shadow Repository on Medusa.

‘How will this work?’ asked Wayland.

Thamatica gestured down the length of the workshop, to where a pair of spheres, each ten metres across, hung from the ceiling in a series of concentric gimbals that allowed them to move in three dimensions. Thirty metres separated them, though they were linked by a braided mass of slender cables. One was bronze, the other cold iron, and carved measurement data lines were the only thing to mar their perfect smoothness, and the only visible clue to the fact that both spheres were slowly rotating.

‘We’re going to attempt a matter transference, linking two exact points on the quantum level of potentiality. Given enough charge, the electrons of any given object can become excited enough to shift to another orbit, and if I can modulate the vibrational frequency of a portion of both objects at the same time, I can attempt to force them into the same place at the same time.’

‘Isn’t that incredibly dangerous?’

‘Monstrously so,’ agreed Thamatica with a gleeful grin. ‘If the two objects don’t behave as I believe they must, there could be an explosion that will utterly destroy the ship.’

Thamatica laughed at Wayland’s look of alarm and said, ‘Fear not, it should be impossible for the affected portions to coexist in the same nuclear sphere. With the right finesse, they should follow the path of least resistance and simply swap places. What was in one sphere should find itself inside the other.’

‘I can’t help but hear all the *shoulds*,’ said Wayland.

Thamatica grinned. ‘You sound like Ferrus did when he vetoed the geo-magnetic experiments I proposed to help fix Medusa’s landmasses in place.’

‘The same experiments that would have caused massive earthquakes all over the planet?’

‘It needed some fine tuning,’ admitted Thamatica, ‘but the principles were

sound.’

Thamatica pulled a heavy brass lever, and the pulsing current from the generators flowed through the cabling with a rising hum of electrical current. The Iron Father adjusted a heavy dial and punched in a series of commands on a primitive physical keyboard.

Wayland watched him with wary admiration. Frater Thamatica’s experimental method was somewhat scattershot, but he had an intuitive gift for seeing the connections between disparate elements that allowed him to make leaps of logic that baffled his fellow Fraters. That some of his leaps carried him into dangerous waters was, Thamatica explained, a necessary evil and one the history books would probably not recall.

The current was building at a fearsome rate, and Wayland watched the jerking needles on each of the gauges flicker into the red across the board. The energy generated here could power the entire ship. Or blow half its superstructure into the void.

Both the bronze sphere and the iron sphere gathered speed, rotating on their confined orbits as the magnetic fields building around them increased in exponential steps. Wayland saw the field strength was building at a rate that would soon be too great for the concentric dampers to contain.

‘Frater?’ he said. ‘The magnetic fields are too strong.’

‘I see them, Sabik, but I need to take them right to the edge if this is going to work.’

Both spheres were spinning too fast to follow, the measurement lines etched into them blurred and meaningless. Whipping lines of electrical force burned themselves onto Wayland’s retinas and the whine of the generators was punctuated by booming discharge and coolant bursts. Every needle was jammed in the farthest extent of red, far beyond where any sane technician would wish them to rest for longer than a fraction of a second.

‘We have to shut this down,’ said Wayland.

‘Just a moment longer.’

‘No, shut off the power.’

‘Almost there.’

Wayland reached out to haul the power level back to the realms of sanity, but before he could pull it, a thunderclap of electro-magnetic force exploded from the first generator and a sheet of flame erupted from where the heavy cables were slotted home. An explosive magnetic wave punched outwards from the spheres and Wayland was hurled back against the bulkhead below the mezzanine

as though he'd been backhanded by a Contemptor. The magnetic force held him pinned to the wall like a specimen until its power finally bled away to a level where he slid down towards the deck. Tools and loose components fell in an iron rain as their weight overcame the rapidly diminishing magnetic field.

Every mechanised portion of his armour was inert, and the full weight of every plate bore down on his body now that the fibre bundle muscles were not empowering him.

The workshop was in ruins; every electrical device dark and lifeless, every loose metallic object scattered in a radial pattern from the centre. Thamatica picked himself up and surveyed the devastation of his workshop as rogue magnetic waves bounced around the space, spinning loose metal around and transforming crackling electrical force into miniature whirlwinds of blue light.

Despite the damage to his workspace, the Iron Father looked absurdly pleased with himself, as though this had been the desired outcome of his experiment.

In the centre of the workshop, the two spheres had become one, a misshapen mass of iron and bronze in a lumpen mass of metal like a flattened figure of eight. Bronze ran into iron, iron into bronze, streaks of both metals spiralling into the other as though the two had been smelted and pressed into one another. Wayland had no doubt that had the generator not blown out, then the resultant explosion from the interface of the two spheres would have torn the ship apart.

'I'm going to need bigger generators,' said Thamatica.

He was stronger and more powerful than ever before, yet he could not feel the blood he spilled, nor relish the visceral force of the impacts. Berossus waded through a mass of bodies, striking left and right, bludgeoning a path through the combat servitors with every sweeping blow. Small-arms fire battered his armour, but he felt only a mass of indicators and icons that lit up his frontal carapace display.

He strode through the modular building shells like a savage metal god of war, bringing death and bloodletting to any who crossed his path. The training halls were mocked up into a recreation of a typical pre-compliance city, based on a conflation of architectural measurements taken by Iron Warriors expeditionary forces on conquered worlds.

Warriors from the 2nd Grand Battalion were spread through the false city, with orders to engage their warsmith and attempt to stop him from reaching its centre, a waypoint chosen by Galion Carron to best judge how Berossus was adapting to his new machine physiology.

Not well, was the warsmith’s first impression.

He felt no pain, but nor did he experience again the savage bloodlust he had felt upon the killing fields of Isstvan. A heavier impact rocked him back, but even that was simply a reaction and not a sensation. He spun on his waist gimbal to see a group of Iron Warriors emerge from cover, one carrying a smoking missile launcher he was reloading at speed. They moved with precision, as he would expect, but he swung his rotary autocannon up to kill them nonetheless. The heavy gun chugged out rapid-fire shots, punching three of his warriors from their feet. Blood misted the air as they fell, but the others kept coming.

Berossus snarled and stomped over the rubble of the training arena to meet them. His strides were short, his speed reduced and his charge robbed of the fury he had known in mortal flesh. Another missile slammed into his casket, but the armour dissipated the worst of the impact.

Then he was in amongst them.

A thundering blow from his hammer hurled two of them back, their armour cracked open. Another strike drove a third to his knees, but the fourth landed a blow that registered as causing damage, yet felt as meaningless as a readout on a data-slate. His threat perceptors registered more enemies closing behind him, and he rotated his upper body through one hundred and eighty degrees to bring his cannon to bear.

A heavy blow on his upper surfaces registered, but before he could do more than acknowledge it, a powerful impact crazed his internal display. A power fist or thunder hammer. Something incredibly dangerous and destructive. Berossus lurched to the side, spinning his body in an attempt to dislodge his attacker. More gunshots stitched across his flanks, but he ignored them. The booming clangs on his topside armour, each like the pealing of a sonorous bell, were all that mattered.

He could not bring his weapons to bear, and he slammed his metal body into the walls of the nearest structure. The force of the impact was tremendous, enough to cause numerous damage indicators to light up his display, but still his attacker held on, tenacious and determined. Berossus lurched like a drunk or one of the flesh-spare unfortunates whose neural pathways had degraded too far for them to survive the transfer from flesh to iron. Another impact, then another. Berossus roared, his augmitters howling in a dozen frequencies until he realised that he could use that energy to generate an electrical current through his body. With a thought he engaged his internal generators to spool up enough power, but a last blow to his topside registered terminal damage.

‘Cease hostilities,’ ordered Galion Carron on a vox channel heard by all members of the 2nd Grand Battalion.

The gunfire slackened and fell off altogether, and Berossus brought his body back around to its front facing as a warrior dropped from his upper carapace. His armour was dust-covered and battered, the yellow and black chevrons of his shoulder guards flaking and scuffed. A bolter was mag-locked to his thigh, and sure enough, he had a power fist, its upper faces still wreathed in a shimmering haze of disruptive energies.

Berossus leaned towards the warrior.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, hating the metallic rasp of his voice.

The warrior reached up and unclipped his helm, cradling it in the crook of his arm before answering.

‘Grendel,’ he said. ‘Cadaras Grendel, 16th Company.’

‘You are tenacious.’

‘I do what needs to be done,’ said Grendel, his face smooth and unremarkable, his black hair worn long and wound in elaborate braids across his scalp. ‘You’re vulnerable from above. The armour’s thinner there, and if an enemy can get up there, a Dreadnought’s helpless as a newborn.’

Even isolated from conventional mores of discourse, Berossus could hear the man’s arrogance and self-assuredness. He growled his displeasure at the comparison.

‘I am a warsmith of the Fourth Legion, I am anything but helpless.’

‘So you say, but I’d have torn what’s left of you out through your roof if Galion Carron hadn’t ended this.’

Berossus reached down and plucked Grendel from the ground on the end of his hammer, holding him up before him as though deciding how best to crush the life from him. He had expected the warrior to struggle, to fight back, but Cadaras Grendel just looked up at him with a blend of confidence and insouciance that appealed to Berossus.

‘He’s right, my lord,’ said Galion Carron. ‘You *are* vulnerable to attack from above.’

‘Perhaps so,’ said Berossus, dropping Grendel to the ground. ‘But only a madman would dare get close to me like that. I do not think it is a failing I need to be concerned with.’

Galion Carron approached Berossus, circling him and inspecting the damage done to his buckled plates of armour. His servo-arm tapped the metal, taking echo-readings of the internal structure and communing with the onboard systems

of the incredibly complex mechanisms that allowed flesh and metal to merge and work as one.

‘You are still thinking and fighting like a mortal warrior,’ said Carron, coming round to stand before him. ‘But you are so much more than that now. You are a master of war, a god of iron and flesh that bestrides the battlefield like a colossus. All bow before your might, but still there are ways to bring down a god.’

‘Topside armour,’ said Grendel, making a clenched fist.

‘Is but one way,’ snapped Carron. ‘Crush infantry, tear their mortal flesh limb from limb. Despise them for the insects they are, but do not think yourself immune to their weapons. Kill them all, but always remember that they *can* hurt you.’

‘I will never let that happen,’ promised Berossus.

TEN

No Unkindness

The Most Complex Key

The Paths Below

He was a ghost. A black spectre moving through the silence. An enemy of light, he sought only to move through the sepulchral gloom of the ship, a friend to darkness and kin of shadows. His silence and invisibility should have been an impossibility, his body too large and his armour too cumbersome to move with such stealth, but Nykona Sharrowkyn had been trained by the very best shadow masters of the Ravenspire.

He *wraith-slipped*.

Sharrowkyn moved from darkness to darkness and the shadows opened up to him, welcoming him like a brother. He anticipated the sway of lights as they advanced and retreated, bending into the deeper black. Few could *wraith-slip* like Sharrowkyn, for only the most innately gifted of Deliverance's children could evade the light for long enough to attract the attention of the shadow masters. Along the corridors of the *Sisypheum*, through its vaulted chambers of arming, past groups of training warriors, and into the guts of its engine spaces he moved without detection.

His armour was a composite thing, an amalgam of plates taken from the dead, and the dead are the quietest of all. Since his earliest days in the labyrinths of the Ravenspire he had learned how to muffle noise, first with rags and packed earth, then with acoustic dampers and skill. Though the armour's construction was a matter of improvisation and need, it fitted him better than any he had worn in his time with the XIX Legion.

Sabik Wayland had helped with its construction, but he had performed the secret rites of silence alone, as every Corrivane should upon being elevated to the winged ranks. Each warrior moved silently in his own way, and it was each warrior's understanding of the empty spaces between sounds that allowed him to

occupy them.

The interior of a starship was an easy place to become a ghost. Its sounds were manifold, loud and predictable; the creak and groan of its structure as it flexed in transit, the regular heartbeat of its engines, the chatter of its crew and the half-heard, half-imagined sounds of the hot neutron flow along the outer hull. Many sounds, many places to hide.

Almost too easy.

Every warrior of the shadows needed to be tested, for without true tests the ability to *wraith-slip* began to erode. Only by becoming the shadows could a warrior move through them without revealing himself. Only by being truly hunted could he reach that place inside himself that allowed the *wraith-slip* to become perfect camouflage. Such protection was not infallible, of course, no warrior was ever *invisible*, but such was Sharrowkyn's affinity with the dark that he might as well have been.

Few on the *Sisypheum* had skill enough as trackers to hunt a warrior of the Raven Guard, so he took risks and chose the routes with the fewest places in which to hide. He paused in his travels through the ship, clinging to the upper reaches of an access corridor, fingertips wrapped around a flexing duct pipe. Sharrowkyn watched two warriors of the Iron Hands pass beneath him. Morlock veterans.

Tough, hard, brave survivors.

Survivors like him.

No, not like him, the Iron Hands had one thing denied to him.

They had the confraternity of their brotherhood. Nykona Sharrowkyn was alone.

Pulled from the hellstorm of betrayal on the brink of death by Sabik Wayland, Sharrowkyn had escaped the slaughter of Isstvan V by the narrowest of margins. Wounded nigh unto death and with no way off world, there had been little choice but to escape with the shell-shocked survivors of the X Legion. The Iron Hands had wanted to fight, to die alongside their fallen primarch, but Ulrach Branthan's last order had been to escape, to regroup, to survive.

To fight back.

Sharrowkyn remembered little of those early days, his wounds too grievous, his body too broken. His abiding memory was of a gravel-voiced form looming over him in the apothecarion of the ship he had been taken aboard.

'You will not die, Raven Guard,' the voice had said. 'Do not let the weakness of flesh betray you, not when you have survived so much. I took a blow from the

Phoenician, yet I live. You will live too.’

The authority in that voice was absolute, and Sharrowkyn had obeyed. He had lived, and he had healed, but he was alone, cut off from his Legion and ignorant of what had become of his gene-father.

The Iron Hands *knew* their primarch was dead, and this had annealed their flint hearts into something unbreakable. Sharrowkyn knew nothing of Corax’s fate. Had he escaped the massacre or was he some bloodied trophy pinned to a banner pole, a totem like the head of Ferrus Manus?

Comfort and strength could be taken from certainty, a measure of closure to allow the healing of scars on the heart, but with his primarch’s fate a mystery, Sharrowkyn could only exist in a twilight limbo, caught between hope and despair, steadily diminishing as his imagination conjured ever more terrible fates for his lost father.

Was it better to be ignorant of Corax’s fate, or would it be kinder to know he was dead?

It was a question he had spent many months considering, but was no closer to answering. Only certainty could provide respite, but amongst the shattered remains of their Legions, certainty was in short supply.

The Morlocks moved on, oblivious to his presence, and Sharrowkyn swung silently down to the deck. A gladius slid from its frictionless sheath without a sound as Sharrowkyn moved down the corridor, finding patches of shadow where mortal eyes would not notice the deeper darkness within, exploring every nook and cranny of the proud starship.

Sharrowkyn felt the air grow chill, and knew he was near the apothecarion. With senses attuned to the micro-sounds that preceded motion and presence, he heard the whisper of something approaching the other side of the door. He leapt for the opposite wall, springboarding up and onto the suspended tangle of twisting, collimated pipes and ducts of hissing iron and sagging rubber. He eased into its concealing darkness, making himself one with the shadows and scaling down the power outputs of his armour, a ghost of blackness amid the gloom. The door slid open, letting out a sigh of frozen air and the creak and scrape of abutting plates. The sounds of armour at the other end of the corridor beyond the door told Sharrowkyn that Septus Thoic stood guard at Branthan’s stasis chamber. Footsteps clanged on the grilled floor, and even before Atesh Tarsa emerged, looking haggard and marrow-tired, Sharrowkyn had known it would be him.

The Salamanders Apothecary took a moment to rub the heels of his palms

against his eyes, those crimson orbs that made him so hard to read. Without pupil or imperfection to give them a measure of character, Tarsa's eyes were as blank as the lenses of a Legion battle-helm. He let out a breath of pure exhaustion as the door slid closed behind him, and Sharrowkyn felt a stab of sympathy for the Salamander.

Charged with keeping a dead man alive, it was his task to prolong the agonies of a warrior who deserved peace and an end to his suffering.

Tarsa looked up and smiled. 'Is there something wrong with the floor?'

Sharrowkyn was so surprised he almost let go of his handholds.

There could be no doubt about it, Tarsa was looking right at him. The gladius shivered in his hand, ingrained instincts screaming at Sharrowkyn to drop on his discoverer and end him, but Tarsa was not the enemy. Instead, he sheathed the short-bladed sword and dropped to the deck. He rose from a crouch and cocked his head to one side.

'You saw me,' he said.

'Of course,' replied Tarsa. 'Who else would I have been speaking to?'

Sharrowkyn looked into Tarsa's red eyes, blank as polished garnet, but could see no augmetics, which would have gone some way to explaining Tarsa's sighting of him. Sharrowkyn was more interested than annoyed, though it irked his professional pride to have been detected so casually.

'I'm not normally so easily discovered,' he said.

'I'm sure,' agreed Tarsa, 'but when you see as the Fire-born do, there is little that escapes our notice. Especially in the darkness.'

'Every legionary sees well in the darkness,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Not like we do,' said Tarsa, turning to move on down the corridor. 'Walk with me a while?'

Sharrowkyn nodded and matched step with the Apothecary, unconsciously mimicking the timing of Tarsa's stride to mask his own.

'It must be hard for you,' said Tarsa. 'Being here, I mean. On a ship not of your Legion.'

'It's not your Legion either,' pointed out Sharrowkyn.

'I know. It is hard for me, so I assume it's hard for you,' said Tarsa, and Sharrowkyn saw their route was taking them to the *Sisypheum*'s refectory.

'It is difficult,' he admitted, grateful for the understanding. 'I am alone and know nothing beyond these walls. It is… not easy to be apart from the Unkindness.'

'The Unkindness?'

Sharrowkyn touched the white-winged raptor on his shoulder guard. ‘A colloquial term my Legion sometimes uses when we gather in any numbers.’

‘Ah, I see,’ nodded Tarsa with a tight-lipped smile. ‘Legion argot. We have similar terms, based on the customs of the seven sanctuary-cities.’

‘Tell me one,’ asked Sharrowkyn.

‘Very well,’ said Tarsa, pausing to think of one he could tell. ‘The folk of Hesiod once used the term Hell-dawn to refer to a time when the ash banks broke and the sun burned.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘The Hell-dawn heralded the coming of the dusk-wraiths.’

‘Dusk-wraiths?’

‘The gloaming kin of the eldar,’ explained Tarsa. ‘Every time at that inauspicious hour they would come to reave and enslave. They took men, women and children as spoils for their torture ships, but in the end they were crushed by Vulkan in a great battle at Hesiod’s gates and cast from our world forever. The Hell-dawn was ever a time to be feared, but with the end of their raids, we took the term back and made it our own. It is now a Salamanders deployment tactic, a sudden terror assault into the heart of an enemy formation.’

‘I like it,’ said Sharrowkyn.

Tarsa nodded at the appreciation as they reached the refectory. He held out his hand to Sharrowkyn, who took it gratefully.

‘You are not alone, brother,’ said Tarsa. ‘The Iron Hands saw their gene-father die and it gave them fresh purpose. But you and I? All we have is scorched earth and uncertainty.’

Felix Cassander squeezed his eyes closed and tried to shut out the wet, animal sounds coming from Navarra. He had thought a legionary could endure any pain, but his time in Apothecary Fabius’s vivisectorium had shown him the naïvety of that belief. He found he could no longer measure the passage of time, for there was never any change in the forlorn gloom in this abode of the damned. Drugs and pain kept him quiescent, wrapped in a swaddling fog of distorted perceptions. He existed in a netherworld of screams, laughter, weeping and the butcher’s sound of blades hewing flesh. Sometimes he saw what was happening, and wished he hadn’t. Sometimes his imagination painted a more vivid picture.

The vivisectorium was a place of diabolical surgery, where Fabius and his flesh-hooded servitors removed and replaced limbs and organs with wet meat parts from other organisms that bore no relation to their new host. Navarra had

become a test bed for all manner of limbs: hindquarters covered in russet fur, spring-loaded insect legs, bladed arms with chitinous exoskeletons amputated from some towering arachnid creature or whipping tentacular appendages with needle-toothed mouths that dripped acidic bile.

With every physiological rejection, Fabius would hiss in frustration and remove the offending appendage for incineration. The loathsome contraption that hung from the ceiling seemed to watch Cassander as Navarra struggled against the bonds, dripping its vile black fluids to the floor where they writhed like slippery eels of inky sentience before drooling down the blood-clogged drain.

Nor had Cassander been spared Fabius's attentions.

Where Navarra's broken frame was a perfect chassis on which to suture new and exotic body parts, Cassander's healing body was a fully-functioning biological factory in which to test Fabius's creations at cellular depths. Pathogens, retroviruses, gene-splices and pluripotent bacterial cultures were introduced to his metabolism via piston-driven injections directly to the heart and the results observed and recorded.

Molten rivers of infected blood raced around Cassander's body, each polluted branch and venous highway carrying microscopic invaders that attempted to dismantle him at the genetic level. But each attempt met with failure, for the Emperor's great techno-biological work was too cunning and too subtle to be undone by synthetic diseases of mere men, no matter how inventive their attack. Though Cassander's genhanced body recovered from each assault, the pain of being the battleground for such a hard-fought viral war was almost beyond endurance. He lost any sense of time in hallucinogenic deliriums, wracked with agonising spasms and burning with raging fevers that left his skin too hot to touch.

With each successful resistance, Cassander's body was left purged and hollow, a shell of its former glory, yet still able to rebuild itself with the nutrient-rich fluids pumped into his system, readying him for the next round of attack. His body could repair almost indefinitely, but his mind was suffering the trauma of constant pain and anguish. Yet each time Cassander felt the flayed ruin of his sanity slipping closer to the abyssal plunge into madness, he pulled himself back with hate for the nightmare surgeon inflicting these horrors upon him.

Fabius took great relish in the suffering he caused, asking after the precise nature of his pain and the exact details of each area of localised infection. Cassander told him nothing, and his only solace in this place of torment was the

look of bitter frustration on Fabius's face.

'You will break eventually,' said Fabius. 'Everyone who comes here always does, even the ones who come willingly. Though, it has to be said, you have resisted longer than most.'

That gave Cassander a moment of pride.

'I wonder why that might be so,' mused Fabius.

Cassander had slipped away at that point, awakening an unknown time later to hear Navarra screaming as Fabius stripped out his secondary heart and replaced it with a glistening, pulsating *thing* that looked more organism than organ. Navarra had no limbs to thrash in pain, but his screams spoke of the unimaginable agonies he suffered.

At length Navarra quietened, his breathing ragged and raspy with mucus as he slipped into unconsciousness. Beneath the splint cage, Cassander saw his brother legionary's chest was a mass of uneven sutures, each one raw and infected. The skin at his ribs rose and fell with undulant motion, as though questing tendrils slithered beneath his flesh. Cassander fought to hold his bile at bay at the idea of some alien parasite sealed within his body.

Fabius straightened from his labours, his back to Cassander, but a number of the waving appendages of his spine-mounted device were aimed in his direction. Cassander had no doubt they could alert the lunatic surgeon if he so much as made a move against him.

And in the unknown quantity of time since he had been brought here, throughout the screaming misery of his infections, he found that the idea of making a move against Fabius had become less of an abstraction and more of a potential plan. Cassander's convulsions and lunatic thrashing had stretched and loosened his bonds to the point where, given a window of opportunity, he might be able to break them.

Just thinking about snapping his tormentor's neck gave him a sense of warm contentment. All he needed was one arm free and he could loose the rest of his bonds without difficulty. He flexed one arm fractionally, feeling some give in the previously immovable strap securing him to the slab.

Fabius turned towards him with his skull-stamped rictus grin, and spoke as though no time at all had passed since their last discourse, scratching idly at his tapered chin with a black, claw-like fingernail.

'Perhaps your resistance is something to do with your Legion's unique genome. Is your dour dependability woven into your very gene-seed? Something deliberately bred into you, a personality trait embedded at conception… Might

that be it? What do you think, Felix?'

Cassander could not remember revealing his name to the surgeon, but supposed he might have screamed it to him in a fugue state of contagion.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I have no training as an Apothecary.'

'Oh, I am aware of that,' said Fabius, slapping a comradely hand on his shoulder, eliciting a gasp of agony. Every pain receptor hovered just below the surface, alive to the prospect of awful, overloaded sensation, a side effect of Fabius's 'medicines'.

'Why?' said Cassander. 'Why do this…?'

'Why would I not?' countered Fabius. 'Especially now that Horus has forced Alpharius to furnish me with the secrets hidden away for centuries in the Emperor's deepest vaults. I have all the pieces I need to open a door to treasures undreamed. And you will be my key. Think of it, together we will be at the forefront of the creation of a new breed of genetic post-humans, beyond the paltry things the Emperor made of us. We will be gods, divine beings, invincible and immortal.'

'You are a madman,' hissed Cassander. 'How could you ever have been of the Legions?'

'A madman?' sneered Fabius, leaning in. 'I will create a race of gods and you dare to call me mad? I will be the father of a new race of hyper-men, new beings of numinous perfection against whom the Emperor's warriors will be adjudged no better than primitive apes.'

'No,' said Cassander, bunching a fist. 'You won't.'

Fabius laughed, a thin, reedy wheeze channelled through dusty pipes that had long since had any need for such a sound.

'And what is to stop me, Felix Cassander? You?'

'Yes,' said Cassander, ripping his arm from the slab with a roaring surge of hate.

His bicep swelled with simmering power, and he slammed his fist into Fabius's jaw. The impact sent Fabius sprawling across the floor of the vivisectorium. The Apothecary landed badly, striking his temple against a mortuary slab, his legs twisted beneath him and the weight of his Chirurgeon parasite bearing down on him. Cassander wasted no time in applying his strength to his other arm, quickly freeing it with a burst of adrenaline and raw power.

His head pounded with the sudden activity and his heart burned with white heat in his chest at the exertion. The suspended creatures of the ceiling-mounted surgical device shrieked in their gestalt amalgam voices, a blind wail of panic

and fury. Fabius shook off the effects of the blow and shouted for his servitors, but Cassander had already freed his legs and swung them from the slab.

His body was weak, but still strong enough to do what needed to be done.

Fabius rose to his feet, backing away from Cassander's unsteady advance, his pale skin a mask of blood, his black eyes glittering like shards of coal on snow. Incongruously, he was smiling. A shadow darted to Cassander's right and something stabbed into his side, a needle-quick injection from a whipping, tentacle arm.

Cassander snatched at the arm and ripped it from the creature in a wash of brackish blood and chemical effluent. It wailed and he spun on his heel, driving his fist into the heart of the thing. Slippery cables or arteries writhed beneath his hands, warm and pulsating with sickeningly organic motion. Cassander pulled a handful of glistening ropes of intestine from the creature and a wash of stinking fluids flooded from its ruptured body. The suspended monster's screams fell silent as the conjoined internal structure of its hideous body died.

Fabius backed away from Cassander, but he followed the demented Apothecary on unsteady legs. Hate was giving him strength, but exhaustion and banked pain were draining him with every second that passed. Cassander lurched after Fabius, feeling toxins coursing through his body. Strangely, the effect was already diminishing, and he felt a moment of small victory.

'Your poisons don't work any more,' he hissed. 'You made me immune to them.'

Fabius had backed into the farthest corner of the room, a shadowed region the firelight did not illuminate.

'Nowhere left to run, Apothecary,' said Cassander.

Fabius didn't answer and reached into the shadow to lift something hung on the wall.

It was a sword – a primitive thing with a blade of napped flint and a fashioned hilt of gold. It caught the light strangely, as though dusted with powdered diamond, the blade chipped and looking far too short for the handle.

'You know what this is?' asked the Apothecary, and Cassander did not like the sudden confidence in his voice.

'I don't care,' said Cassander. 'I can still kill you, sword or no sword.'

'This is the anathame,' said Fabius, turning the blade and lifting it close to his lips. 'The kinebrach blade that brought down the great Horus.'

'It's just a sword,' said Cassander, throwing himself at Fabius.

The Apothecary whispered something he didn't hear and swung the blade at

him. It was a poor cut, one Cassander was easily able to deflect with his forearm. The blade caught the edge of his shoulder, nicking the skin. A tiny bead of blood welled in the cut, but then Cassander was past the blade and had his hands wrapped around Fabius's throat.

He slammed Fabius against the wall and the sword fell to the floor as the Chirurgeon machine jerked to life, its multi-jointed arms stabbing down into his shoulders with blades, snapping pincers and invasive drills. Blood sprayed from the wounds, but the pain only drove Cassander on. Fabius grinned, the tendons in his neck bulging like steel hawsers as blood-flecked spittle gathered in the corners of his mouth and his black eyes bulged in his cadaverous features. He seemed to be enjoying the sensation of being choked to death.

Cassander spat in his face, but an instant later he was on his knees and screaming.

A supernova of unimaginable agony enveloped his entire body, spreading from the insignificant cut on his shoulder to wrap his flesh in the worst pain he had ever known. His blood was afire, his organs imploding and his bones cracking to powder. Every pain that could be conceived poured into Cassander's body, the very worst agonies and the most inhuman tortures. They multiplied and combined, tearing his body into pieces, breaking him into his constituent parts and inflicting the same procession of agonies on each portion.

Cassander rolled onto his back, retching and shaking and sweating and screaming.

'It's exquisite, isn't it?' said Fabius. 'At first I thought the sentience of the blade was entirely mad, that all it could do was kill. But I have discovered that it enjoys suffering too, that its effects can be tailored if you know how to ask.'

'Kill me,' hissed Cassander through bloodied, gritted teeth.

Fabius shook his head. 'No, this was just a lesson. You are far too precious to kill, but not so valuable that I can't let you suffer.'

Cassander felt the pain begin to ebb, but he still couldn't move. So far was he beyond his pain threshold that he could not have risen even had the Emperor himself commanded it. He shivered, mewling like a newborn as shadows loomed above him. Flesh-cloaked servitors with static-hissing mouths, sutured eyes, patchwork bodies and limbs not their own lifted him from the ground as Fabius replaced the flint-bladed sword on the wall.

'Put him with the terata,' ordered Fabius.

Wayland had travelled close to regions of space where the strange realm of the

warp bled into realspace before, but there was something about this storm that felt wholly different. It filled the viewing bay of the bridge, casting a pall of unnatural violet light throughout the vaulted compartment. Like most ships of the X Legion, the *Sisypheum* was as functional in its design as any engineering space. Fewer than half of the servitor stations were occupied, and the empty ones were scorched and black.

Frater Thamatica stood at the podium normally occupied by the vessel's Master of Engines. The Master had been immolated by secondary damage inflicted by an Alpha Legion broadside. Likewise, the Master of Ordnance was dead, and the half-machine Vermanus Cybus – the senior surviving Morlock veteran – manned weapons control.

Never a place of irrelevant chatter at the best of times, the *Sisypheum*'s bridge was sombre under the warp storm's relentless gaze. Too many had died here in the escape from Isstvan for it to be any other way, and even Thamatica kept his mordant humour under lock and key when serving on the bridge.

Wayland probed the outer front of the bleeding storm from the surveying station as Cadmus Tyro, standing at the captain's control lectern, guided them towards the blistering edge of unlight that frothed from the outermost regions.

Most such spatial anomalies waxed and waned over time, like the tempests that raged over the seismotropic continental plates of Medusa. Such storms were fierce in their wrath, devastating settlements and wiping out entire clan branches, yet they were transient things that could be endured or avoided with enough warning.

But something of this storm spoke of permanence, as though it were only ever going to get bigger. If it had a history, no one aboard the *Sisypheum* knew it, and none of their surviving cartographical data accorded it more than a wholly unremarkable name that utterly failed to convey its dreadful permanence. Yet the more Wayland looked at it, the more it seemed as though it looked back, like a malignant presence set in the flesh of space to look down endlessly on the realms of men.

Something as dreadful as this would soon earn a name of note, but Wayland shied away from thinking of one, knowing that to name a thing was to give it power.

The golden-sheened eagle dropped from the upper vaults of the bridge and swooped down to land on the shoulder of Cadmus Tyro. It flexed its wings with a rustle of metal feathers, and shifted its bulk from foot to foot. Even this mechanised creature with no autonomous consciousness seemed to sense

something grotesque from this storm front. Wayland checked himself. He was framing his points of reference in emotional superstition and attributing anthropomorphic behaviours to a soulless creature. That was a poor mode of thought for an Iron Father.

‘Any sign of a clear route through?’ asked Tyro, reaching up to stroke the bird.

Wayland shook his head. ‘Not that I can see,’ he said. ‘It’s a solid storm front.’

‘Frater Wayland, I hope for your sake you’re not telling me that we’ve pushed the engines to breaking point to get here ahead of the traitors for nothing.’

‘I don’t know yet,’ said Wayland, understanding Tyro’s frustration, but wishing he could better clamp down on his emotional response to it.

‘When *will* you know?’

‘I won’t until the guide gets to the bridge.’

‘Thoic, Numen and Bombastus are bringing him up now,’ said Thamatica, speaking to head off further confrontation. ‘We’ll know more when they arrive. Either way, we should be able to collect some fascinating immeteorological data in there. Assuming we survive, of course.’

‘This isn’t a fact-finding mission, Thamatica,’ said Tyro.

Thamatica’s reply was cut off as the main access doors to the bridge opened and the booming footfalls of a Dreadnought broke the solemn silence of the bridge. Septus Thoic and Ignatius Numen walked either side of a slender figure in a shimmering robe of fuliginous hues of black. His hood was drawn up over his face, but there was no mistaking the alien poise of his race. Though he was counted as an ally, the Morlocks still had their guns drawn and held across their chests.

Behind the guide came a thunderously proportioned warrior, towering and armoured in heavy plating that had once been black, but which was now almost entirely stripped of paint by gunfire and flames. Brother Bombastus marched with mechanical weight, his Dreadnought body wheezing and leaking from the numerous patch-jobs and repairs done to his enormous body. A retro-fitted missile rack was rotated down over the rear plates of his armour, but the storm bolter slung beneath his enormous powered fist and the perforated nozzles of the monstrous flame cannons on his other arm were aimed squarely at the guide.

The guide was not a prisoner of the Iron Hands, but nor was he entirely trusted.

Trust was in short supply in the galaxy, and alien species were yet to earn humanity’s.

‘Here he is,’ growled Bombastus, the tearing fingers of his fist snapping and

rotating in their housing. Dubbed ‘Karaashi’ after the peak into which Ferrus Manus had crashed in Medusan legend, Bombastus had been a warrior of great passions and furious charges. With a temper to match the bellicose temperament of the volcano and a love of fiery destruction, the name had stuck, even after his interment in a Dreadnought sarcophagus. If anything, the transition from mortal flesh to iron had only increased his aggression in battle.

Escorted by the Morlocks, the guide walked to stand before the captain.

‘Captain Tyro,’ he said, his voice soft and empty of emotion. ‘It is an honour.’

‘Remove your hood,’ said Tyro. ‘I don’t like it when people conceal their faces. It means they have something to hide.’

‘As you wish,’ said the guide, reaching up to pull back the velvet of his cloak.

Their guide was eldar, with sharply defined features, generous lips, and shimmering eyes of glacial blue. Wayland moved from the surveyor station to stand alongside him.

‘What’s it called?’ asked Tyro.

‘*He* is called Varuchi Vohra,’ said Wayland. ‘And your tongue will not shrivel up if you talk to him directly.’

‘I’m aware of that,’ snapped Tyro. ‘But I have met his kind on the battlefield before and seen Medusan lives ended on their blades. I don’t trust him.’

‘Then why are we here?’ demanded Wayland. ‘There is no way into the storm without him.’

Varuchi Vohra spoke again. ‘I assure you, Captain Tyro, I mean you and your warriors no harm. Quite the contrary. It is in my interests to stop your enemies as much as it is yours.’

‘Convince me,’ said Tyro. ‘Wayland’s told me why, but I want to hear it from you.’

‘As Sabik Wayland has said, I am a scholar, a poet and an explorer amongst other things. I belong to an academic order of my people known as the Ebonite Archymsts. We study the stars and the matter of the universe from which we are all derived. I know this region of space intimately, for I was the first of my kind to sing of its currents and its tempests.’

‘Sing them?’ asked Tyro.

‘It is the closest approximation I can give for how we communicate and store information,’ said Vohra. ‘It takes decades of training in our order’s shrine to master the technique, but I suspect you have neither the time nor inclination to learn of it.’

‘At least we agree on that,’ said Tyro. ‘I’m still not clear on why you’re

helping us.’

‘The warriors you call “traitors” are dangerous beyond imagining. Not just to your race and your empire, but to all life. They serve the Primordial Annihilator, though only a handful of them truly appreciate what that means. Your goal and mine are in harmony, but we must not hesitate or our enemies will reach the citadel of *Amon ny-shak Kaelis* before us.’

‘*Amon ny-shak Kaelis*? What does that mean?’

‘In an extinct dialect of my people, it means the *Forge of Sun and Stars*.’

‘And you say they have a guide like you?’ asked Tyro.

‘They do,’ agreed Vohra. ‘A renegade who was cast from our order. My brother.’

‘What do you have to do to be exiled from a bunch of scholars?’ asked Vermanus Cybus with his grating, mechanised tones.

‘Oh, that’s easy,’ said Thamatica. ‘Both the Mechanicum and the Iron Fraternity has threatened me with expulsion many times. Dangerous experiments, radical thinking, untested weaponry, that sort of thing.’

‘The amount of times you’ve almost blown us up, I almost wish they had,’ said Cybus.

A ghost of a smile hovered on the lips of the eldar as he continued. ‘Frater Thamatica is correct – my brother developed an unhealthy interest in the darker aspects of knowledge, the things that are kept hidden for good reason.’

‘Things like what?’ asked Thamatica. ‘Give me an example.’

‘You know I cannot do that, Frater Thamatica,’ said Varuchi Vohra. ‘Suffice to say that there are things in this galaxy that should forever remain shrouded in the past. What lies in the heart of the citadel is but one of them.’

‘And this renegade can guide the traitors to this citadel?’ asked Cybus, the red optics of his eyes unwavering in their scrutiny.

‘He can, but he does not know the paths I know,’ said Vohra. ‘The Paths Above are safer, but the Paths Below are quicker. With my help, you would steal a march on your foes through the spaces that are not warp-touched and arrive at *Amon ny-shak Kaelis* long before they could hope to reach it.’

‘Our instruments aren’t detecting any break in the storm front,’ said Tyro. ‘We’re not seeing a way in at all, let alone a safe one.’

‘Your instruments are incapable of seeing the Paths Below,’ said Vohra, ‘but they are there.’

‘Captain,’ said Wayland. ‘We don’t have a choice. We have to let Varuchi Vohra guide us.’

‘You said yourself there was no clear way in,’ snapped Tyro and the mech-eagle shivered its wings at his sudden outburst. ‘He could fly us straight into a warp squall and destroy us.’

‘He could, but why would he?’ countered Wayland. ‘He would die too, and I don’t think he sought us out to kill us in such an elaborate way. The Iron Warriors and the Emperor’s Children will be here soon, so we have two options: trust him or give up.’

It was an obvious gambit, and Tyro saw through it in a heartbeat.

‘You think you can goad me into giving the order you want?’

‘No, but it’s that stark a choice,’ said Wayland. ‘And we don’t have time for a debate.’

Tyro glowered, but Wayland already knew the captain would agree to letting the eldar scholar guide them. To give up was anathema to the Iron Hands. A task once begun was never abandoned, even in the face of insurmountable odds. That mindset had kept them fighting in the face of their grief, in the wake of their loss and against the pall of desperation that sought to engulf the remnants of the Legion.

Even so, for long moments, Cadmus Tyro stared at the billowing clouds raging at the edge of the storm surges and thunderheads of malignant light. He too was well aware of the dangers inherent in attempting to navigate such a dangerous region of space. Ships avoided such anomalies, especially when they bled through from the unknown alternate universe in which they existed. To entrust his ship and everyone on it to a xenos species known for their treacherous wiles and unpredictable nature went against every warning voice in his skull.

But what choice did he have?

‘Take us in, Varuchi Vohra,’ said Tyro. ‘But know this. If I think, even for an instant, that you are betraying us, I will have Bombastus here burn you to ashes. If you are leading us to our deaths within this warp storm, you will die first. Am I being clear?’

‘The warning is entirely clear, but it is unnecessary,’ said Vohra.

‘Not to me,’ said Tyro.

ELEVEN

A Heavy Burden

The Dodekatheon

A Memory of Flesh

Nearly two thousand Iron Warriors stood in unmoving ranks before Kroeger, and the idea that they were his to command staggered him. Since leaving Hydra Cordatus, a moment that had given him an un-accountable sense of relief, he had wrestled with the idea that he was a warsmith of the IV Legion. Orders were his to give, and lives his to command. Until now his only power of life and death had been that which rested on the edge of his chainblade or in the magazine of his bolter.

Now his very words would decide whether men would live or die.

Part of him relished that power, but the bulk of him resisted the inevitable distance that would put between him and the bloody edge of war. His weapons were as much a part of him as his hands and heart. Only in a swirling, bloody melee could a warrior ever feel truly alive. Life was at its most distilled in the spaces between the blades and bullets.

Behind the ranked-up warriors were squadrons of armoured vehicles: Rhinos, Land Raiders, Mastodons and hybrid machines fashioned by the Pneumachina from the wreckage of damaged vehicles and the strange machinery torn from the heart of the dismantled Cadmean Citadel. Since reaching the edge of the warp anomaly, the Pneumachina had worked with feverish intensity in their sealed forges, crafting ever more lethal-looking machines, as if just being in the shadow of this mysterious region had somehow empowered their labours. Some of their creations were blatant in their purpose, little more than towering gun-carriages or infantry crushers, but others were less obvious, festooned with caged machinery and dangerous-looking devices that seemed to serve no clear purpose.

Kroeger marched down the length of the ranked warriors, a vision of burnished iron with gold and jet chevroning. These warriors had brought

countless worlds to ruin, toppled the fortresses of the mightiest empires, both human and alien, but who among the Imperium of Man knew any of their names?

At Kroeger's insistence, none of his warriors wore their battle helms, each man's stoic face staring straight ahead in iron unity. For the most part they had dark hair, close-cropped to the skull, but here and there he saw a warrior with the long scalp locks common amongst those from Lochos, the tattooed whorls of the Delchonians, the blood-tinted hair of his own folk from the Ithearak Mountains and the forked beards favoured by the Vedric Tyrpechs. He would know the men who fought for him, he would learn their names and tell them that he knew their deeds, for how else would they fight and die for him?

He looked closely at their faces as he passed.

Hard features, worn smooth by genetics, enhancement and war-won knowledge. The Iron Warriors knew the craft of death like few other Legions, and they had made uncounted sacrifices in service of the ideals of the Imperium. These men were mighty, they had fought to bring the galaxy to compliance. Their reward was to be cast aside in favour of those Legions with greater rolls of honour, Legions that had prospered on the broken backs of the Iron Warriors.

Heroes of the Ultramarines, the Blood Angels and the Imperial Fists were lauded and immortalised in art and verse, but where were the parades for the Iron Warriors?

Where was their glory?

The answer was quickly forthcoming: in ashes on Olympia. Blown to the wind from a billion worldwide pyres. Those who should have clamoured for tales of its crusading sons were all dead: the Legion had burned them all, and the despair of that day was etched into their skin, like ashes smeared on the cheeks of grieving widows and faithless sons.

But Kroeger felt no guilt for what they had done on Olympia. What did it matter that it had been the world that the Lord of Iron had called home? His world or another, it was irrelevant. Any other planet would have burned and been razed to the ground and no one would have cared.

Only the name gave it significance, and names were just noise.

Like grief, guilt was rust that ate the iron in a warrior's soul, and Perturabo had spoken to the entire Legion in the ashen rains of their homeworld, telling them that guilt had no place in his Legion.

Guilt was for lesser men who looked to the past for validation.

The Iron Warriors would never allow the crippling taint of guilt into their

ranks, for only the future would give them validation.

Kroeger's thoughts were interrupted as he saw a familiar face in the front rank of his Grand Battalion. He knew he should walk on, that there was no point in drawing attention to a wound in the pride of the warriors he now commanded. But the spiteful part of him couldn't resist the chance to rub a little salt in one particular wound.

He paused before Harkor, pleased to see his former warsmith's stature now much reduced.

'Harkor,' he said, only just stopping himself from calling him *Warsmith*.

'Kroeger,' said Harkor.

'That's *Warsmith* Kroeger,' he said.

Harkor nodded, and swallowed the bile that must surely be rising in his throat.

'You have found a place in the Grand Battalion?'

'Yes, warsmith,' replied Harkor. 'Battle-brother, 55th Storm squad.'

Kroeger knew it, mediocre earth grubbers and breach fodder.

'You will fit right in there,' said Kroeger. 'Sergeant Ghasta is competent.'

'Competent was never enough for me… warsmith,' said Harkor, and the bitterness in his voice was so rich that Kroeger had to force himself not to laugh in the man's face.

'No, and look where that attitude got you.'

'Permission to speak freely, warsmith,' asked Harkor.

Kroeger hesitated, but nodded eventually. 'Speak, but do not waste my time.'

'It is a heavy burden being a warsmith, I know this all too well. There are a thousand responsibilities that rest on your shoulders alone. And broad as they are, Warsmith Kroeger, you do not have the experience to carry them all yet. I could help you.'

This time he did laugh in Harkor's face.

'You would help me? I replaced you after the primarch stripped you of your rank. I can almost feel your blade between my shoulders now.'

Harkor shook his head and said, 'No, warsmith.'

'Why would I ever trust you, Harkor?'

'Because what else have I to lose? The Lord of Iron will never grant me rank as a warsmith again, so what advantage would I gain in betraying you?'

'Personal satisfaction?'

'I won't deny the truth of that,' said Harkor, 'but I can help you make this Grand Battalion something legendary. You have the primarch's ear, you have fire and force. Ally that to my experience and you would be Perturabo's most trusted

triarch by the time Horus sits upon the throne of Terra.'

'You only aid me to gain standing and prestige,' sneered Kroeger.

Harkor shrugged. 'There is no shame in that.'

'I suppose not,' agreed Kroeger. 'But I would take a snake to my bed were I to trust you.'

'I did not say you should trust me,' said Harkor. 'Just that you should listen to me.'

'I'll think about it,' said Kroeger.

Bare girders columned the bridge of the *Iron Blood*, and bolted gantries stacked above one another ran the length of it, each filled with augmented servitors to man the more mundane elements of the ship's operation. A handful of Iron Warriors manned the stations requiring post-human input, though only a few were known to Perturabo.

He stood with his arms folded across his chest, staring impassively at the billowing flares, strange tides and curling bursts of ejected warp matter displayed on the viewscreen. The combined fleets of the Iron Warriors and Emperor's Children held station at the very edge of the star maelstrom, its firebright core seething like a star in its death throes as the rippling haze of its storm-wracked corona expanded to swallow everything around it. Umber light from the storm's heart bathed his features, making them ruddy and hale. The warp-born illumination played over Perturabo, dancing in his cold eyes like firelight.

For once in his life, Perturabo looked at the star maelstrom and knew that others could see it too. They did not see it *quite* as he saw it, but they could at least acknowledge its existence. He saw beyond its dark light to the engulfed worlds within: phantom images that ghosted in and out of perception and fleeting moments of solidity in a realm where such things were anathema.

He saw planets where all reason and Euclidian certainty had been abandoned, where the physical laws that underpinned the galaxy were playthings of lunatic forces beyond mortal comprehension.

Worlds of fire; worlds that were somehow crafted into geometric shapes; worlds wreathed in unending lightning storms; islands of ephemera that were vomited into existence and destroyed an instant later to sink back into the roiling chaos from which they had been birthed. Madness held sway in the nightmarish confluences of this storm, a reign of inconstancy that would break even the hardiest sanity.

Yet amid the endless cycle of creation and destruction, one of the half-glimpsed worlds retained a sickening solidity – a bleak world of lifeless rock and crooked spires, where an impenetrable sun, like the pupil of an impossible eye, held sway in a sky of unchanging emptiness. Perturabo blinked and the dead world and its black sun sank back into the malignant hues of the star maelstrom.

For as long as he could remember, since coming to awareness on that rain-slick cliff, he had felt the gaze of the star maelstrom upon him. It had always looked down upon him; judging him, measuring his worth and spying on his every moment. A life lived beneath its cold scrutiny had made him brooding and loath to offer his trust, ever-watchful and aware of its baleful glare.

It had always been with him and always would be.

And now he was to venture into its depths, following the guidance of an alien seer. What would he find in there and, more to the point, what might find him?

Somehow he had always known he would be one day enter the star maelstrom. Its call had been gentle, but insistent. A reeling-in that had been as invisible as it had been impossible to ignore.

Part of him resisted the idea of summons. He could give the order to turn his Legion around and take its hundreds of ships to where he could more readily contribute to Horus Lupercal's war effort, but every time the thought surfaced in his mind it was obliterated like a timber palisade before a melta ram.

Perturabo had lived his life under the gaze of the star maelstrom, yet this was the first time his ships had ventured near it. Why should that be so? He had been a primarch in the Emperor's armies; hundreds of starfaring vessels were his to command and no one would have questioned him had he chosen to lead his expeditionary forces here.

The answer was obvious.

Until now, he had no need to venture within.

Fulgrim may have given him superficial cause with his tall tales of imprisoned war-deities and weapons of the apocalypse, but Perturabo knew that wasn't the real reason. He had come because now was the time to see what lay within the star maelstrom.

Star maelstrom?

How long had he known it by that description without ever learning its true name?

Perturabo called up the astrogation charts for this region of space stored in the *Iron Blood*'s data engines. The viewscreen shimmered as it was overlaid with a neon-bright grid, curving arcs and flickering key labels for those few stellar

objects in this region worthy of a name. At the heart of the screen, a vertical black label bisected the fiery orange heart of the star maelstrom like the eye of a great cat. Imposed upon the bar was a name.

Cygnus X-1.

Perturabo knew the star maelstrom was not the first spatial anomaly to bear that name, and whichever lowly scribe had ascribed it again was a fool. Something this powerful and terrible deserved a name to strike fear into the hearts of all who saw it, a name that would resonate down the millennia until the end of time, when the stars went out and the only light in the universe was the nightmare glow of the star maelstrom's ever-devouring borders.

Perturabo's fingers danced over the slate from which the charts had been brought forth, and his thin lips curled in an approximation of a smile as the name in the vertical black bar changed. It would change throughout the fleets, spreading to any data engine that called up maps of the galactic north-west.

'Yes,' he said. 'A name to lodge in the hearts of all who hear it.'

The *Iron Blood*'s engines flared at Perturabo's command, taking it into the star maelstrom.

No, not the star maelstrom.

The Eye of Terror.

They called it the Dodekatheon, after the twelve tyrants of Olympia, and the masons' order of the IV Legion had met aboard Iron Warriors starships before Perturabo had even been reunited with his gene-sons. There was nothing secret in its formation or gatherings, nothing hidden at its core, and no secrets worthy of keeping in its activities. It was a true meeting place of builders and warriors, where new structural designs were unveiled, past battles refought and new theorems of war given voice.

Every warrior of the Legion was welcome, but in practice only those of rank had the opportunity to attend any of the lodge meetings. Kroeger had known of it, as had every Iron Warrior, but he had never found the time to seek out a meeting. On the approach to the anomaly in which lay the weapons of the Angel Exterminatus, Barban Falk and Forrix had arrived at his arming chamber as he was replacing the blunted teeth of his chainblade.

'You have bond-serfs to do that,' said Forrix.

'I prefer to do it myself,' said Kroeger, sitting cross-legged in a steeldust habit of hessian and mail links over his bodyglove. A hundred or more razor teeth were spread on an oiled cloth before him, like trophies taken from the jawbone

of some mechanised shark. Each one was polished and fresh, oiled and ready to rend.

‘You have better things to do with your time,’ said Falk, as though irritated by a fellow triarch performing such a manual task.

‘Such as?’

‘Coming with us,’ said Forrix, reaching to lift the sword from Kroeger’s grasp.

Kroeger snatched the weapon away before Forrix could touch it.

‘Don’t touch my blade,’ said Kroeger, fingers curling around its hilt. ‘Where are we going?’

‘To the Dodekatheon,’ said Forrix. ‘It’s time you were known there.’

Kroeger eased his grip on his sword and laid it on a sword rack against the wall, amid a host of blades, bludgeons and firearms.

‘The masons’ order?’

Forrix nodded and they led him into the gleaming, oil-scented hallways of the *Iron Blood*, through corridors he travelled regularly and chambers he had never known. They crossed vaulted processionals of ranked artillery pieces, with hundreds of heavy armoured vehicles suspended on massive chains from the strengthened roof trusses. They climbed great spiral stairs that wound around thunderous columns of magma-hot power, and super-hardened magazines packed tightly with shell casings, entrenching gear and millions of rounds of volatile ammunition. More than any other Legion, the interiors of the Iron Warriors vessels were given over to supply and logistics, for their way of war depended on a steady supply of high-explosive warheads.

Though it was easy to become lost while travelling through the guts of a starship, Kroeger knew they were heading toward the *Iron Blood*’s frontal sections. The high-walled chambers of hot iron and sweating pipework through which they passed became ever more cramped as more and more space was given over to the prow weapon systems: the vast tubes of the forward torpedo arrays and power relays serving the heavy gun batteries mounted to either side of the carved ram of its bow.

‘You’ve really never been to a gathering of the Dodekatheon?’ said Falk.

‘Never,’ said Kroeger.

‘Why not?’

Kroeger shrugged. ‘Always seemed like there were more important things to do with my time than talking about war. I prefer to be ready for fighting.’

‘You are a triarch,’ said Forrix. ‘Talking about war is part of being ready for it now.’

The curving ramp they were descending opened out into a long, lancet-vaulted triumphal way, along which numerous groups of Iron Warriors were gathered in tight knots. Some pored over sheaves of architectural plans, while others clustered around hololithic displays projecting schematics of wall details, projected bombardment patterns and fire schedules. Perhaps a hundred or so warriors had assembled, some in armour, some in their mesh and mail robes.

'It looks very… informal,' said Kroeger.

'Don't let appearances fool you,' said Forrix. 'This is as much of a vipers' den as ever you might imagine. Alliances are made and broken here, pacts and oaths sworn and forgotten before the night's end. It's all very useful.'

'Doesn't sound useful at all.'

Forrix grinned. 'On the contrary, to see who favours whom and where plots are formed is knowledge that will stand you in good stead when it comes to deciding upon your order of battle. Pitch any three warsmiths into battle alongside each other and it's always good to have some healthy rivalry between them. Judging the right level of rivalry can spur each warsmith to greater heights of endeavour, just as getting it wrong can cause your army to fight itself as much as the enemy.'

'I see,' said Kroeger, though the idea of engineering rivalry between warsmiths seemed needlessly antagonistic. 'Do other Legions have orders like this?'

'Other Legions have since established similar orders, but the Dodekatheon was in place long before Lorgar's errand boy thought to supplant it with a lodge of his own making.'

'Aye, we soon sent that worm packing,' laughed Falk. 'We have our order, and we don't need any other.'

Heads began turning as word of the Trident's arrival spread through the assembled warriors. Though rank and title were left at the door in the Dodekatheon, some were too important to be entirely left behind. Nods of respect followed the three warriors as they made their way through the press of bodies. Kroeger saw faces he recognised, faces he had never seen before and faces that didn't look like they belonged in the IV Legion.

One such face belonged to the scarred Emperor's Children swordsman who had accompanied Fulgrim into the *Cavea Ferrum*. The same warrior who had put him on his back. Lucius, Fulgrim had called him, and with his twin sword sheaths empty at his waist. Kroeger's hand flashed to his own scabbard before he remembered that he too was unarmed. Lucius grinned as he read the anger in him and sketched a casual salute.

‘Why is that slippery bastard here?’ he asked.

‘A gesture of cooperation between Legions,’ said Falk, practically spitting the answer. ‘We invite one of Fulgrim’s warriors to our order, we send one of ours to theirs.’

‘A spy?’

‘An emissary,’ said Forrix. ‘An ambassador.’

‘Who did we send to them?’

Forrix shrugged. ‘The Stonewrought and one of Berossus’s men. I don’t know his name.’

Lucius moved from sight and Kroeger saw the silver-white hair of Warsmith Toramino as he conversed with a shaven-headed warrior with his back to Kroeger. The two warriors slipped into the side cloisters of the chamber, but not before the warrior turned his head and Kroeger recognised Harkor. He had warily accepted Harkor’s offer of help, all the while knowing the man would eventually betray him for position, but it still surprised Kroeger how quickly his new equerry had run to Toramino to boast of his influence with the newest triarch.

Perhaps there was something to the notion of attending such meetings to gauge the ebb and flow of treachery and infamy after all.

‘The Trident,’ said a grating voice with all the warmth of a glacier. ‘You do not often grace us together. The coming fight must be serious indeed.’

An Iron Warrior in full armour emerged from the crowds and came towards them. He wore the burnished iron of the Legion, his gold and jet polished to a brilliant finish, but the bulk of his armour was the cold ivory of an Apothecary. One gauntlet was enlarged with the tools of the healer and custodian of the dead, the other bearing a jade sceptre in the shape of an elongated lightning bolt. One end was topped by a sapphire sphere filled with vapour, the other by a jade sphere of rippling liquid contained within an invisible energy field.

‘Iron within, Honourable,’ said Forrix, inclining his head in a gesture of respect.

Falk also gave a nod of respect. ‘Honourable Soulaka,’ he said. ‘Iron within.’

‘Iron without,’ said the Apothecary, with a curt bow.

Kroeger did not know this Soulaka, but instinctively disliked him. His features were roguish and handsome, dark-haired with pale blue eyes that might once have been attractive in a mortal face. His smile was that of a bad iterator, sincere and empathetic, but utterly lacking in real conviction.

‘So this is Warsmith Kroeger?’ said Soulaka, holding out his free hand.

Kroeger shook the hand, wrist to wrist, feeling a strength in the man he hadn't expected.

'Greetings, Soulaka,' said Kroeger.

'My title here is "Honourable",' said Soulaka. 'It is the one rank that endures amongst the equals who come here. But as you are new to the order, I take no offence.'

Kroeger nodded stiffly at the bland rebuke.

'Be at ease in our company,' continued Soulaka, leading them deeper into the chamber. 'There is much in which to take part.'

'Like what?' asked Kroeger.

'I'll show you.'

Long chains hanging from the distant ceiling bore flaming brands that created a low ceiling of dark smoke, making the space feel claustrophobic. The hubbub of voices was pleasantly soothing, but there was an undercurrent of fierce pride that coloured every mention of casualties, breaches, escalades and lines of advance.

Soulaka led them past a table heaped with rubble that Kroeger at first mistook for debris come loose from the walls until he saw the grey-coloured blocks being used to represent companies of warriors and artillery.

'We refight battles from the past,' said Soulaka. 'Ours and those of our brothers, to learn from their mistakes and improve our tactical protocols.'

Through the broad shoulders of the legionaries gathered around the table Kroeger saw a lovingly fashioned representation of a great tower, surrounded by more numbered blocks of units, this time coloured black.

'Here, the warsmiths of the 34th and 88th Grand Battalions are refighting the siege of Dulan,' said Soulaka with a grin, 'though I hope they will not come to blows like their historical counterparts. There is the Iron Citadel of the Auretian Technocracy, where we have found that by committing Angron much earlier to the fight, the butcher's bill would have been much reduced. For the Sons of Horus, at any rate.'

He gestured to a third table. 'And there we have a recent acquisition – the battle at the Perfect Fortress, a defeat suffered by our brothers of the Third Legion despite aid from the Lord of Iron in the planning of its architecture.'

Kroeger stopped to admire the representation of the Perfect Fortress laid out on the great stone-rimmed hololith. Civil structures and fortifications were one and the same, with each portion of architecture a bastion of defence, a strongpoint and habitation in equal measure. While the walls and buildings were

built with what looked like aesthetic considerations uppermost in the warmason's mind, the roads and infrastructure were clearly the work of a more pragmatic individual.

'The population are shields,' said Kroeger, scanning the city for weakness.

'Or civil defence forces, depending on your point of view,' said Soulaka.

'They're meat shields,' said Kroeger. 'But whoever designed it that way is an idiot.'

A ghost of movement, and Kroeger felt perfumed breath at his ear.

'The Phoenician himself designed it,' said Lucius, with a too-intimate hand brushing Kroeger's neck as he slid around him. 'Are you saying my primarch is an idiot?'

Kroeger threw off Lucius's hand, and fought the urge to rip the smug bastard's head off. He felt the solid presence of Barban Falk at one shoulder and Forrix at the other, taking a measure of pride that they stood with him. To attack Lucius would be a mistake, for numerous reasons, and the swordsman knew it. Kroeger swallowed his anger and nodded towards the Perfect Fortress.

'It's a flawed strategy to rely on the compassion of your enemies,' he said. 'This city depends on the attackers being afraid to target the populace. That wouldn't be a consideration if I was leading the attack.'

'Imperial forces don't think like you do,' said Lucius, and Kroeger watched the play of scar tissue on the swordsman's face. Many of his wounds were poorly sealed or deliberately kept from healing properly. The effect must have been painful.

'They will,' said Kroeger. 'Sooner than you think. And anyway, this "Perfect Fortress" fell, didn't it? Wasn't so perfect after all, eh?'

'It fell, yes, but not through any failing of the design,' said Lucius.

'Then why did it fall?' demanded Falk.

'Because we had tired of it, and letting Corax and his monsters have it was more agreeable,' said Lucius. 'My Legion are warriors, not gaolers. We are not suited to be the custodians of conquered worlds, we leave that to other, less… vigorous Legions.'

Kroeger laughed at the pettiness of the insult, and pushed past Lucius towards a vast topographical arena that was part physical representation, part holographic construction. It occupied the entire end of the chamber, a rendering of the mightiest fortress Kroeger had ever seen. It wasn't a defence raised by mortal hands, it was the greatest landmass of a world, shaped by a mighty being to become the strongest, most revered and most implacable fastness in the galaxy.

A masterwork of immense proportions, its complexity and functional beauty took Kroeger's breath away.

Though he had never once set eyes on this place, he knew it exactly for what it was.

'The Imperial Palace,' he said.

'Ah, yes,' said Soulaka. 'A permanent fixture of the Dodekatheon.'

A score of warriors surrounded the table, each one commanding some aspect of its defence or undoing. By their orders were holographic representations of grand armies sent into battle, numerically tagged divisions of tens of thousands advancing and retreating like blood-red surge tides as they laid siege to the Palace. Hecklers shouted advice to the combatants, yelling to indicate sudden assaults from hidden sally ports, portions of rampart left weakly defended, breaches to be exploited and gateways left broken by relentless artillery barrages.

Yet for all the millions of Legion warriors and Army auxiliaries laying siege to the Imperial Palace, Kroeger already saw it was hopeless. The defenders were too entrenched, the walls too high, the defences too coordinated and the cunning of their construction too ingenious to overcome. Few of the attacking armies had a hope of getting over the walls, and most never would. Suggestions bombarded the attacking generals, ranging from the obvious – 'More guns, more assaults!' – to the ridiculous – 'Fight harder!'

Every suggestion that was acted upon was met and countered with ease, the warriors taking the role of defenders parrying and repulsing each attack with the bare minimum of effort. Watching their moves and countermoves, Kroeger recognised a pattern in their efforts that was entirely different from those in which he had trained.

The warsmiths were defending the Palace with the tactics of another Legion.

'They're using Imperial Fists doctrines,' said Kroeger.

'Of course,' said Soulaka, appearing at his side. 'Dorn and his labourer Legion are the ones fortifying the Palace, so it makes sense to play by his rules.'

'That's not particularly inspiring,' he said as yet another attack was swept from the Kathmandu precincts and an assault over the Dhawalagiri elevation was repulsed with terrifying losses. Casualties were in the hundreds of thousands.

'I agree,' said Soulaka. 'But our armies outnumber the defenders ten to one. Eventually they will get in.'

Kroeger shook his head. 'Perhaps, but whoever is left standing in the Palace will be master of the largest ruin on Terra,' he said.

‘You think you could do better?’ said a voice behind him.

All conversation ceased as the Lord of Iron emerged from the shadows, resplendent in his full battle armour and with *Forgebreaker* harnessed across his back. The cybernetic interfaces across his scalp shimmered in the torchlight and his melancholic features were hooded and dark. Fulgrim’s ermine cloak hung from his shoulders, the fastening skull gleaming and the inset gemstone streaked with numerous golden lines.

‘My lord,’ said Forrix. ‘We did not know you were here.’

‘Clearly,’ said Perturabo as the Iron Circle emerged from the shadows behind him. Forrix was amazed that the primarch’s shield bearers had been able to infiltrate the prow space without anyone hearing the heavy footfalls of their approach. The bulky armoured battle robots flanked the primarch as he made a slow circuit of the Palace table. He shook his head as though disappointed at his warriors’ lack of ambition and vision. His cold blue eyes scanned the frozen positions of the armies laying siege to the Palace and his lips pressed into a thin line at what he saw.

Kroeger watched the primarch’s displeasure, and remembered why he had been brought into the Trident.

‘Yes, I think I could do better,’ he said.

Perturabo looked up, and said, ‘You think you could take what your fellow warsmiths have so spectacularly failed to capture?’

‘I do,’ said Kroeger.

‘Then you are either a fool or extremely gifted.’

‘Perhaps a little of both.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Perturabo. ‘Restore the battle simulation to baseline. Begin again, and this time Warsmith Kroeger will assume the mantle of assault command. All other parameters to be the same. Begin.’

Perturabo stepped back from the holographically enhanced model as the dead returned to life, and the fictive armies withdrew. Kroeger shook his head and pointed a mailed fist at him.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Not all parameters will be the same.’

‘What would you change, my bold triarch?’ asked Perturabo, leaning on the edge of the table and letting the green shimmer from the table’s hard-light projectors illuminate his face with a spectral glow.

‘I don’t want to fight warriors following another primarch’s stratagems.’

‘Then who would you fight?’

‘I want to fight you,’ said Kroeger. ‘I want to see what happens when

Perturabo defends the Emperor’s Palace.’

The apothecarion was silent, and Cadmus Tyro was reluctant to break that silence with his words, but who else could he talk to? In truth, the chamber had long since ceased to be a place of healing. Now it was a tomb, wreathed in the chill of the grave and used only to inter a brave man whose wounds should have seen him dead thrice over.

He sat beside Ulrach Branthan’s casket, with his hand resting on the frosted glass surface. Haptic sensors registered the cold and measured the contained energies of the stasis field within, but there was no sensation beyond what the augmetics were telling him. His bionic replacement was more sensitive, more receptive and stronger than the limb that had been cut from him so long ago, but he found he now missed the reassuringly *organic* feel of his hands.

Strange that a memory of flesh should come to him here, where flesh was by far the most redundant material present. His own body was over sixty per cent mechanised: his legs, one arm, his lungs and a significant portion of his cardiovascular system. A phage-cell infection received from a leucotoxic bio-pathogen while clearing out the Galieanic Cluster had seen to that. Not that he had minded at the time, of course, only the truly favoured were able to leave the weaknesses of the body behind so swiftly and so completely. Only Vermanus Cybus matched Tyro in chimeric bio-modifications, but Cybus had long been viewed as pathological in his reverence for the machine and loathing for flesh.

In truth, Cybus was a warrior not even his battle-brothers could be around for any length of time, for his adherence to the doctrines of augmetic superiority had already spread through the Legion even before the death of Ferrus Manus and his warning against such beliefs to the Iron Fraternity.

Garuda felt Tyro’s disquiet and rubbed its metallic head against the rasped skin of his neck as if to comfort him. Where the steel of Tyro’s augmetic arm joined with his shoulder was a flexing mass of integrated tissue that webbed in a fine mesh with the base of his neck. It itched abominably, but the analgesics that normally soothed the irritation of the skin had all been requisitioned for the operation of Branthan’s casket.

‘Easy, the captain will be restored to us,’ said Tyro, aware he was addressing his words to a bird that could not answer him. He corrected himself. A bird that *chose* not to answer him. Garuda and Ulrach Branthan were boon companions, and it had often seemed as though they had spoken via some invisible communion.

‘Ah, Ulrach, you’ve got me talking to this damn machine of yours,’ he said, tapping his fingers on the glass in a rhythmic tattoo. ‘It’s been as loyal as any of us, I’ll give it that.’

No answer was forthcoming from his captain, not had he expected one. Apothecary Tarsa had suggested that it might help Branthan if he were to hear familiar voices around him, providing a link between the frozen world he now occupied and the world of warmth above. They had taken it in turns since Isstvan to come to the apothecarion to speak to their former captain and give voice to the trivialities of the day, the operations they had planned and the fears they had for the coming war.

Tyro suspected the Salamander’s suggestion was more for the living than the living dead.

Since breaching the outer regions of the great warp storm, Varuchi Vohra had been as good as his word, guiding the *Sisypheum* between its squalls and immaterial thunderheads with a deft and subtle hand. Breaching so dangerous a storm would normally have made for a juddering, nightmare-filled voyage, but the eldar Paths Below had kept them from the worst side effects of so dangerous a journey. Even the Geller fields were unnecessary, though Tyro had kept them raised anyway.

Vohra assured him they were making good time, but it was impossible to know for sure. Every auspex reading was garbled nonsense that registered only impossible spikes of tortured physical reality and every chronometer aboard the ship had either ceased functioning or skittered randomly forwards and back in time.

Truly, this was a realm of impossibility.

And they were flying straight into the heart of it.

‘I’ll be honest, Ulrach, I don’t know what I’m doing,’ said Tyro, shaking his head. ‘They look to me to have the answers, but I don’t have any to give them. You were always the captain who saw the bigger picture; I was just a line warrior with a title. I don’t know if you have any connection to the ship now, but we’re about as far from anywhere sane as I could ever imagine. If you can believe it, we’re taking an eldar at his word and letting him guide the *Sisypheum* into the largest warp rift I’ve ever known, chasing down some wild story of ancient gods and doomsday weapons. You’d have put a bolt through that eldar’s head as soon as look at him, and we’d be back doing something useful.’

Tyro paused as Garuda hopped from his shoulders to land on the edge of the casket. The bird preened as it walked the length of the icy container, and Tyro

wondered if it knew why its former master wasn't coming out.

'It's all gone to hell, Ulrach. We're fighting the bastards, I swear we're all fighting them, and we're doing some good too. And we're not alone any more; we've made contact with twenty-five other fighting cells. We're cutting enemy supply lines, denying them easy passage. We've broken their communications and killed thousands of traitors. Our kill ratio is higher than ever, but I just don't know if it's enough. I don't know what the primarch would do, and that… that… scares me.'

The admission shocked Cadmus Tyro, for he had long since imagined himself purged of that crippling emotion. Fear was what lesser mortals endured. Decades of training, psycho-conditioning and iron discipline had made his psyche impervious to the mind-killer. Tyro had faced monstrous alien beings, hordes of greenskins intent on carving him up with motorised cleavers and shrieking aethereal horrors that pushed through the barrier between warpspace and reality.

He had faced all these and more without fear, yet the yawning uncertainty of their future had all but unmanned him.

'Should we go back to Terra, regroup with the rest of the Legions? Or should we stay out here, because we're actually *fighting*, actually *killing the enemy*? We're the Shattered Legions, and we're hurting them, but are we hurting them enough to matter? I don't know, and I don't know how to fight without certainty. You and the primarch gave us that certainty, but where do we go from here?'

His iron fingers curled into a fist.

'Asirnoth's blood – we need you, Ulrach,' said Tyro, opening his fingers and slamming his palm down onto the glass. The stasis field shimmered and buzzed as the casket registered the impact. A warning chime sounded, and a red light winked to life on the thermostatic controls.

Garuda took to the air with an angry blurt of binary that sent a spike of pain lancing into his skull. Tyro sat back, suddenly nervous. Had he disrupted some vital system? He didn't know. Should he send for Atesh Tarsa?

The red light winked out, and Tyro exhaled a sigh of relief. The very idea of something changing within a stasis field was patently ludicrous.

'You see? Emotion. We're all at breaking point, Ulrach,' said Tyro, getting up and pacing the length and breadth of the chamber. 'Ever since Ferrus… since Isstvan, we've been fraying at the edges, unravelling, and I don't know how to stop it. We're losing what made us great, Ulrach. The iron will at the heart of us, it's, I don't know, it's rusting or coming apart.'

Cadmus Tyro stopped at the end of Branthan's casket and leaned forwards,

resting his elbows on the bevelled edges, letting the frustration of months of isolated warfare in the north bleed out of him in a juddering sigh.

‘This isn’t the kind of war I was made for,’ he said. ‘I’ll fight it, and we’ll bloody the foe, but can we win it? I’m not sure.’

Only the hum of machinery and the skitter of claws on the casket’s lid disturbed the silence. Tyro stared at the blurred outline of the man he had followed into battle a hundred times and more, a lifeless effigy of life instead of life itself. A corpse frozen in time, just waiting for some distant archaeotechnician to dig him from an exposed glacier.

‘You know, I think these are the longest conversations we’ve ever had,’ he said. ‘If you weren’t in that casket, I don’t think you’d have listened to half of what I’m saying. You’d have slammed me into that wall and told me to get a grip of myself. You’d have said that I was a fool to let the weakness of flesh rule my thinking. And you’d be right to do it.’

Garuda tapped its silver beak against the glass, and Tyro straightened with a soft chuckle that utterly belied his grim mood.

‘You’re right,’ said Tyro. ‘Let’s go, the captain needs his rest.’

He hammered his fist against the battle-scored metal of his plastron and held out his arm for the mechanised eagle to hop on. The bird backed away from him, and tapped its beak on the glass again. He beckoned to the eagle, but the bird steadfastly refused to come to him. Its moods – if mechanised confections could be said to have moods – were often inexplicable, but this was obstinate even for it.

‘Come here,’ he said. ‘Now.’

The bird didn’t move.

Tyro reached for it, but Garuda pecked at him, and its beak crackled with electrical discharge as it made contact, cutting the iron of Tyro’s gauntlet like an energised blade. He snatched his hand back, but before he could give voice to an angry curse, he saw what had drawn the bird’s attention.

It wasn’t at first apparent what he was seeing, because his mind refused to accept it.

But the more he looked, the more it became impossible to deny.

Branthan lay as he always had, cold and unmoving, with the Heart of Iron wrapped around his body like a squatting mechanical parasite. His limbs were still wrecked and broken, his chest ruined by the four mass-reactive craters punched through his torso.

No, not four.

Tyro saw only three bolter wounds.

TWELVE

The Palace Besieged

A Taste for Profligacy

Bigger Generators

Impervious and impregnable were words spoken by tyrants since the first earthworks of antiquity had been thrown up around their great halls. History told grim tales of how such words were no more than empty boasts, that time and firepower could bring down any wall. No fastness was ever impregnable, no wall impervious, and there was no artifice of man that could not be torn down.

Or so Forrix had always thought.

As Kroeger laid siege to the Emperor's Palace, he watched with grim amusement as Perturabo fended off his first attacks. For all his initial bluster that he was no warsmith, Kroeger was holding his own, making cautious moves to test his enemy and bold offensives in an attempt to catch him off balance. Perturabo was falling for none of it, and each time it appeared Kroeger might have made some significant gain, a later gambit of the primarch's would reveal it for the trap it was.

Over-extended thrusts were decapitated and the proxy warriors caught in the pockets quickly surrounded and destroyed. The siege was played out at speed, days passing in minutes as Kroeger's armies crashed against the walls of the Palace like bloody breakers. The earthworks at Haldwani, long regarded as fundamentally flawed by the Iron Warriors, took every punishment Kroeger could hurl at them, and the Legion warriors manning them even mounted a number of devastating sorties through their fire-blackened gates.

Divisions of men and swaggering mobs of Titans were removed almost as soon as they took to the field of battle. Orbital plates saturated the battlefield with earth-shaking bombardments and emplaced guns swept the Gangetic Plain with hellish pyrostorms in the wake of repeated strafing runs and incendiary barrages.

Kroeger was controlling a continent's worth of armies single-handedly, and the strain of such a complex command was starting to show. He began to make mistakes. Like a gifted amateur playing a host of regicide grandmasters at once, he could not hope to see every angle and every riposte to his attacks. Every warsmith in the hall gathered round, their own battle simulations now meaningless in the face of this titanic conflict.

The Petitioners' City fell to Kroeger's armies, flattened to a rocky desert as it became a battleground of titanic war engines. Its dispossessed inhabitants fought alongside the Legions of the Emperor, rising up in a great ragtag host to defend their demolished homes and ruined lives. The Navigators' Quarter vanished in a seething cauldron of flame, a sudden drop assault contained within its boundaries and incinerated under a relentless barrage of Imperial shells and counter-attacking battle robots. It had been a baited trap, and now the foremost shock troops of Kroeger's army had been slaughtered for nothing.

Where the gathered warsmiths had shouted encouragement and heckled in previous iterations of this battle, they now watched in silence, awed at the performance of their primarch as he conducted the music of battle like a virtuoso. Where Kroeger struggled to keep up with his available forces, the avenues of attack opening or denied him, Perturabo had no such trouble. His forces came smoothly to him, his every opportunity seized, his every setback transformed from a potential disaster to a superlative counter-strike.

It was an unequal struggle, but Kroeger wasn't about to give in.

Brahmaputra, the great avenue into the heart of the Palace, was held by a golden army of Custodians, and Kroeger contented himself by pinning them in place, while launching attacks across the canyons of the Karnali and the bleak precincts of the City of Sight. Far from being an easy route through a benighted region of the Palace, the pyskers' enclave was held by the Black Sentinels, reinforced by mysterious regiments that went unlabelled on the hololithic projectors.

Falk leaned over and whispered, 'He's not doing too well, is he?'

'Better than I thought he would.'

'True,' admitted Falk. 'You think he could use some help?'

'Almost certainly,' said Forrix, nodding towards the Dhawalagiri prospect. 'But let's see how he takes on the Custodians' assault.'

'What Custodians' assault? The only ones deployed are the ones at Brahmaputra, and they're not going anywhere.'

'Wait and see.'

An unstoppable charge of hundreds of Battle Titans strode up the statue-lined prospects of the Dhawalagiri. To group so many of his mightiest war machines in one assault was risky, but looking at the disposition of forces, Forrix couldn't blame Kroeger for taking the potentially battle-ending gambit. But Kroeger hadn't seen what Forrix had.

The 'Custodes' pinned in place at Brahmaputra were not Custodes at all, merely a decoy to mask the presence of the Emperor's praetorians elsewhere. In a sweeping pincer, two golden sickle-bladed sorties swept out from the sunken bartizan towers of the outer precincts of the Dhawalagiri. The artillery that had pounded the great avenue to splintered ruin fell to the vengeful Imperials, and the guns turned on the Titans crashing up the Dhawalagiri like mindless savages sacking the capital of a dying empire.

No sooner had the guns staggered the battle engines than Perturabo launched his iron fist.

Lion's Gate burst open and a reserve of Titans emerged to do battle, riding out like knights of old with their lances lowered. The Custodians fell on the scrums of infantry supporting the Titans and within moments the Dhawalagiri was a corpse-choked wasteland of dead attackers.

And with the fall of the last war engine the battle was over and the Palace saved.

Kroeger had nothing left to carry the day and he threw his hands up in defeat, angry and elated in the same moment. He looked like he'd fought the Iron Circle in a sparring session.

Once again time unwound and the scene before them reverted to its original setting, but this time there was remarkably little of the Palace to be rebuilt. The previous engagement had seen it reduced to rubble, a gothic ruin of shattered marble, burning glass and molten gold. Perturabo's defence had preserved all but the most functional of walls.

'You won, my lord,' said Kroeger.

'Of course I won,' said Perturabo. 'Dorn is a fool, and wastes time and effort with the idea that everything he has done to the Palace can be undone. He builds a fortress with one hand tied behind his back, thinking that he can put everything back the way it was. Once a thing is broken, it will always be broken, but my brother cannot accept that.'

'It was an honour to face you, my lord,' said Kroeger.

Perturabo looked at him strangely, and Forrix saw what was coming a heartbeat before the primarch waved him and Falk forwards.

The primarch shook his head. ‘You think we’re done here?’

‘My lord?’

‘Now it’s *my* turn to attack,’ said Perturabo.

It was over in moments.

Perturabo’s armies blew their way through the massive earthwork defences at Haldwani and Xigaze. The sky at the top of the world was on fire. Despite the bombardments of the orbital plates and the constant sorties of Stormbirds and the Hawkwings, the Lord of Iron’s Legions advanced, up through the Brahmaputra, along the delta of the Karnali.

Continental firestorms raged across the Gangetic Plain once again.

As they entered the rampart outworks of the Palace, his streaming, screaming multitudes and the striding war machines were greeted by monsoons of firepower. Every emplacement along the Dhawalagiri prospect committed its weapons. Las-fire reached out in neon slashes, annihilating everything it touched. Shells fell like sleet. Titans exploded, caught fire, collapsed on their faces and crushed the warriors swarming around their heels. Still they came. Lancing beams struck the armour-reinforced walls like lightning. The walls fell. They collapsed like slumping glaciers. Gold-cased bodies spilled out, tumbling down in the deluge.

The Palace began to burn.

Primus Gate fell; Lion’s Gate, subjected to attack from the north; Annapurna Gate. At the Ultimate Gate, Perturabo’s divisions finally sliced into the Palace, slaughtering everyone they found inside. Around every broken gate, the corpses of Titans piled up in vast, jumbled heaps where they had fallen over each other in their desire to breach the walls. The victorious host clambered across their carcasses, pouring into the Palace to fall upon its master and tear him from his golden throne in readiness for the galaxy’s new ruler.

The combined tactical ability of three of the greatest Iron Warriors had singularly failed to keep Perturabo out. A salutory reminder that the master of defence was also the master of attack. Under his command the Palace would be an ironclad fortress, but as his target it was a fragile thing just waiting to be broken open.

Before the attacking red divisions swarmed over the inner precincts of the palace, Perturabo ended the simulation. The holographic elements of the battle faded, leaving only the broad sweep of the sculpted table in its wake. Perturabo leaned over the ruins of the Ultimate Gate and shook his head with a wry grin.

‘I am better than you, brother,’ he said, as much to himself as to those around him. ‘I will always be better than you. I know that’s what you’re *really* afraid of.’

The Stonewrought’s title was well deserved, for while it was said that he was fashioned from the very substance of worlds, Soltarn Vull Bronn knew that it was literally true for all of them, but refrained from pointing out what should have been obvious. They were all made from the leavings of stars, ejected matter compressed and reshaped by billions of years of stellar engineering and biochemical and electrical reactions.

Whether his understanding of this gave him insight into the heart of the stone was a mystery he did not examine too closely. That the stone spoke to him and unveiled its secrets and strengths was enough for him. To know its structure and composition came as naturally to him as breathing, and amongst a Legion like the Iron Warriors that made him special.

Though not, apparently, special enough to avoid this onerous duty.

Accompanied by a brutish warrior named Cadaras Grendel from the Grand Battalion of Warsmith Berossus, Vull Bronn made his way through the fetish-hung corridors of the *Pride of the Emperor*. They followed a limping warrior named Lord Commander Eidolon, who wore a razor-hooked cloak over his garishly coloured armour and bore a monstrously heavy hammer not unlike that of the Lord of Iron.

Eidolon had greeted them cordially on the embarkation deck, accompanied by an honour guard of warriors whose armour was a riot of clashing colours and horned spikes. The gorgets of their armour extended beyond their shoulders, fitted with all manner of vox pick-ups and augmitter enhancers. Their helms bulged with aural implants and instead of bolters they carried bizarre weaponry that pulsed like generators on the verge of an overload.

Eidolon had named them Kakophoni, but had declined to explain their nature.

Vull Bronn tried to conceal his shock at the sight of the Emperor’s Children’s flagship, but he was sure that Eidolon had seen his reaction and grinned. The Lord Commander’s manner put Vull Bronn on edge. His skin was ashen and lifeless, his eyes sunken in their sockets like those of a cadaver.

The *Pride of the Emperor* was a place of light and noise, of spectacle and grotesqueries. At every turn, Vull Bronn’s eyes beheld some new and terrible sight. His senses reeled at the sensory overload, but the journey to *La Fenice* was just the beginning.

Rumours had spread amongst the Warmaster's allies of the great debauch that had taken place here, an opera of such staggering excess that it had driven the Emperor's Children to madness. No one had really believed it, but as the warped doors of the grand theatre swung open before him, Vull Bronn suddenly believed every wild rumour and knew them to have entirely failed to capture the horror of what had truly happened.

'Throne…' he hissed, before remembering the inappropriateness of that oath.

No one appeared to notice.

Cadaras Grendel let out a breath of astonishment.

'Welcome to *La Fenice*,' said Eidolon.

Vull Bronn had seen picts of Fulgrim's grand theatrical ballroom, some reportedly taken by the renowned Euphrati Keeler, but this place bore only a fleeting resemblance to that once magnificent playhouse. Vull Bronn squinted through the dazzling beams of intense light strobing down from the arched roof, barely able to make out shadowy forms moving through the clouds of musky incense that boiled from hanging censers like an alchemical experiment gone wrong.

The stench was sickly sweet, hot and fragrant, but with a lingering hint of something rotten beneath. It caught at the back of Vull Bronn's throat and he wanted to spit to rid his mouth of the taste, feeling some lingering after-effect worming its way into his system. Garlands of faces and stretched canvases of human skin hung from the royal boxes above, and bouquets of bones sprouted from dripping iron sconces. Unseen drums boomed in a discordant thunder like an arrhythmic heartbeat that wove in and out of a roaring, squealing morass of sounds from swaying vox-casters.

The Thaliakron had majesty and grandeur, but *La Fenice* had none of that.

'What have you done to this place?' asked Vull Bronn.

'Raised it to the level of wonder,' said Eidolon, his voice little more than a rasping growl, as though his throat and vocal chords were no longer working in sync.

Mindful of his status as a guest, Vull Bronn said, 'It is like nothing I have ever seen.'

'Few have,' agreed Eidolon. 'It must be a welcome change from the tedious formality of the Dodekatheon. Here we celebrate what we have become, rather than dwelling on the past or things that might have been, but never will be.'

'The Dodekatheon is a gathering of warriors,' said Vull Bronn, masking his irritation at Eidolon's casual insult. 'We gather to better ourselves.'

‘As do we,’ said Eidolon, leading him deeper into *La Fenice*.

Their path wound through a cavalcade of nightmares made real, a corruption of everything for which the Legions had once stood. Vull Bronn saw flesh opened up and the glistening insides brought forth for sport, for interest and for pleasure. Mortals and Legion warriors made play with their bodies, cutting them with symbols and designs that were beyond comprehension or belief.

Great casks of wine were siphoned with intestinal pipes, like giant organs being drained of their vital fluids. Heaped piles of reclining bodies drew smoke from drooling hookahs, their eyes glassy and limbs slack. Grendel paused to snatch a fleshy tube from a supine legionary with blood-frothed saliva drooling from the corner of his mouth. He sucked hard and grimaced at the taste of whatever was coming through the tube.

He spat a mouthful of viscous ooze that looked like the scrapings from a cancerous lung.

‘It’s not Olympian vintage, but it’s got a kick to it,’ said Grendel.

‘Touch nothing,’ ordered Vull Bronn, but Grendel ignored him and took another swig.

Creatures that might once have been human stalked the theatre like numinous observers, beings so far removed from their original physical template that they were an entirely new species. Bodies of patchwork torsos from a dozen different individuals moved with reptilian locomotion on limbs that were a mix of arms and legs taken apart, broken and remade in dozens of unique and terrible ways, like the aborted failures of some diseased creation myth. Lunatic eyes stared at him, and he recoiled from the repugnant mix of joy and terror, ecstasy and insanity in the faces grafted to the bellies and spines of the unnatural creatures.

‘From iron cometh strength,’ said Vull Bronn, girding himself against the abomination, but the words sounded hollow, as though drained of their power in this place of dark raptures.

‘The Unbreakable Litany,’ laughed Eidolon. ‘In time you will learn nothing is unbreakable.’

‘What are they?’ said Vull Bronn as the nearest gestalt creature moved away, followed by capering, hunched figures chained to it like offspring wailing to be suckled.

‘Fabius calls them his terata,’ spat Eidolon, his hand unconsciously going to his neck.

‘Terata?’

Eidolon waved a dismissive hand at the departing monstrosity, relishing Vull

Bronn's discomfort. 'It's what he calls the deformed monsters he makes aboard the *Andronicus* with gene-seed torn from the dead. He treats them like children.'

'Some children,' said Grendel. 'Wouldn't want to meet the mother.'

Vull Bronn asked nothing more of the hideous terata, hearing the disgust and hatred in Eidolon's voice. Whatever this twisted Apothecary Fabius was to Eidolon, clearly there was no love lost between them.

The smoke parted for a moment, like a curtain being drawn in readiness for a performance. A baying crowd of legionaries and mortals watched a warrior with a tattooed cheek leaping and spinning across the stage with a pair of silver-bladed swords. His skill was breathtaking, his movements like a dancer.

'Who's the swordsman?' asked Grendel, wiping black residue from his chin with the back of his hand and a grimace of distaste.

'Bastarnae Abranxe,' said Eidolon. 'A captain of what was once the 85th Company.'

'He is supremely skilled,' said Vull Bronn, still observing the correct protocol in the face of what he now understood was its utter inconsequence.

Eidolon's shoulders lurched awkwardly, and Vull Bronn realised it was a shrug. 'He fancies himself a great bladesman, but he is no more than competent.'

'He's not bad,' said Grendel, sizing Abranxe up, as though they might one day be enemies.

'We have better,' admitted Eidolon with some reluctance. 'Cross us and you'll find out how much better.'

Part boast, part threat, Eidolon's attempt at superiority was clumsy. Vull Bronn ignored the jibe. In a place like this, what did petty rivalries matter? Vull Bronn swallowed back a strange nausea, gritting his teeth and blinking away the irritation of the drifting fog of seductive musks.

'I'm finding it hard to believe,' said Grendel, watching as a host of black-clad warriors invaded the stage with screaming blades, but were taken apart in a blistering series of dazzling thrusts, ripostes and decapitating cuts.

'There is one of the Legion known as Lucius who makes Abranxe look like a crippled child,' said Eidolon, looking as if he was choking on the words.

'I've heard of him,' said Grendel. 'He's supposed to be good.'

Grendel vanished into the perfumed smoke to witness more of the swordsman's display, leaving Vull Bronn with Eidolon. Berossus's man had come armed, so perhaps he fancied his chances against Abranxe. Vull Bronn hoped not, but he was already growing less and less concerned with what happened to Cadaras

Grendel.

Or to himself, truth be told.

Eidolon led him to a booth that felt like an island of normality in this kaleidoscope of marvels and wondrous new sensation. Vull Bronn had never known such an array of sensory bombardment, and though he had resisted the gamut of the unknown and the fearsome at first, he was now beginning to enjoy what he was experiencing.

The booth was cushioned with soft fabrics: velveteen, silk, variegated damask and rough textures like shark skin or squid hide. The sensation of reclining on them was unusual, but not unpleasant, and Vull Bronn found that he was, despite his earlier reticence, finding much to his liking in *La Fenice*. He wondered what the Emperor's Children's representative to the *Iron Blood* would make of their staid Legion practices.

Naked slaves, surgically modified with extra limbs like ancient, blue-skinned goddesses, slipped into the booth. They carried elaborate hookahs, with snaking pipes sheathed in serpentine scales and filled with bubbling smoke that coiled into deliberate, cursive shapes.

'What is that?' asked Vull Bronn as a hookah was set before him.

'A concoction of the Phoenician,' said Eidolon. 'A key to the doors of perception and a means of finding the answers to all the questions you never even knew you were asking.'

'Sounds potent,' said Vull Bronn, already anticipating his first taste.

'It is,' agreed Eidolon, unhooking the pipe and holding it out to Vull Bronn. 'Especially the first time you try it. Especially in the Eye of Terror.'

'Eye of Terror?'

Eidolon looked confused, as though he had no idea where that name had come from.

'This warp storm,' said Eidolon, hesitantly. 'That's what it's called.'

Vull Bronn nodded. He knew that. *How* he knew it, he couldn't recall, but it felt as though he had always known it. He had no memory of being told the name, but there was no doubting its appropriateness.

He shook his head and took the pipe, its surface texture wet and organic. 'Skin?' he asked.

'Laer,' nodded Eidolon, pulling in a great lungful of shimmering smoke. His corpse eyes lost their emptiness for a moment, and his jaw stretched wider than any mouth should ever stretch. Tendrils of smoke gusted from his enlarged throat. Vull Bronn knew he should be horrified at the sight, but the sheer

incongruity of it all was strangely fascinating.

He took a breath from the hookah, and a liquid grin spread across his face as the world around him appeared to sharpen, as though each edge and line were etched with greater force on the fabric of reality. He saw echoes in movement, sound as ripples in the air and darting shapes that danced on the edges of his vision. Everything suddenly seemed to be more *real*, as though what he had thought was reality was now revealed to be little more than a veneer over the true face of the world.

More of the adapted slaves appeared, each more outrageously mutilated than the last, and where they had shocked him before, he found himself revelling in each new disfigurement. They came bearing silver ewers, and a slave whose gender was impossible to fix held out a goblet that threw dazzling refractions of light in all directions from the complex lattice of its cut crystal. Vull Bronn tried to follow the myriad beams of light, reaching up to touch them, but gave up as another slave, one with what looked like two halves of separate faces alloyed together, poured a clear, viscous fluid into the goblet he wasn't even aware he'd taken.

A heady aroma of salt swam in his senses and he raised the goblet cautiously to his face.

'Ah, this you will like,' promised Eidolon.

'What is it?'

'We call it *Lacrimosa*,' said Eidolon. 'An exquisite wine bled from the tears of slaves.'

Vull Bronn took a tentative sip. His eyes widened. The taste was, as Eidolon had promised, exquisite. The suffering of a thousand mortals distilled into a single mouthful. The flavour was pain and pleasure combined, a heady symphony of aromas from the erotic to the repugnant. It was heights and depths of emotion in liquid form. He tilted his face back to drain his goblet, and his eyes widened as he saw the portrait hanging high above their booth.

He gasped as he recognised the image of Fulgrim, clad as Vull Bronn remembered him, what seemed like a lifetime ago. The plates of his armour were brilliantly illuminated, each curve and sweep of a golden wing or the palatine aquila upon his heroic form brilliantly rendered, as though Fulgrim himself looked down upon him. As heroic as any portrait hung in the palaces of the Delchonian tyrant, this was Fulgrim as he had imagined himself to be.

Vull Bronn met the eyes of the portrait and the *Lacrimosa* curdled in his mouth.

A jolt of sublime pleasure punched into his system and he felt himself being pulled deeper into a morass of pure sensation. He had come to this place revolted, and a diminishing portion of his consciousness still cried out at the terrible things he was seeing. But the part of him that felt disgust was being compressed within him like the core of a dying star.

‘I should not be here,’ he said, feeling as though the words were coming from someone else’s throat. ‘This is not the way of the Iron Warriors.’

‘It could be,’ suggested Eidolon.

‘The Lord of Iron would never agree to it,’ he said, fighting to keep his thoughts coherent.

‘He would have no choice were the pleasures of the Lords of Profligacy to be brought to the Dodekatheon in secret. Spread through the Fourth Legion thanks to its masons’ lodge, Perturabo would have no choice but to accept the flesh profundities of the Dark Prince.’

‘Dark Prince…?’ asked Vull Bronn, already feeling the question squirming away from him.

‘Isn’t there a delicious frisson to be had in violating the mores of what most would call civilised, in revelling in that which others call debauched?’ said Eidolon, blowing a mouthful of potent hookah smoke in his face. ‘We have all broken our most treasured oath, so what does one more violation matter? Or ten more…?’

Vull Bronn nodded, the sense of what Eidolon was saying now obvious to him.

‘You’re right,’ he said, the words coming from his mouth despite the screaming warning in his skull. ‘I understand now.’

‘Drink,’ said Eidolon, refilling his goblet. ‘Seal your pact with the Dark Prince.’

Vull Bronn smiled and raised the goblet to his lips. ‘Yes, I think I will.’

Before he could drink, a figure loomed from the smoke before him and knocked the goblet from his hand with a backhanded slap. Enraged, he sprang to his feet, finding himself face to face with Cadaras Grendel.

‘Iron within, Stonewrought,’ said Grendel, and the words were a cold knife in his heart. ‘I think it’s time we departed, don’t you?’

‘I will kill you for that,’ snapped Vull Bronn.

‘No,’ said Grendel, casting a poisonous glance at Eidolon. ‘You’ll thank me.’

Grendel’s sledgehammer fist slammed into his face.

And all the light and pleasure went out of the world.

Frater Thamatica's earlier failure to make the thermic displacement beamer functional had not discouraged him from a second attempt. In fact, it had made him more determined than ever to rectify what had gone wrong before. He paced before the control mechanisms, watching the needles monitoring the power levels being fed into the magnetic gimbals as they sat at the farthest extreme of measurement.

'That's better,' he said, tapping an iron finger on one dial that fluctuated more than most.

Down the laboratorium, two new spheres – reconstituted from the amalgamated remains of the first pair – spun in their concentric rings. The magnetic fields surrounding them were orders of magnitude more powerful than the ones he had employed when Wayland had come to observe, hence the greater distance between them and his control station.

Thirty chattering calculus-logi sat on three long benches arranged behind him, like worshippers at a heathen fane. Each blank-faced, shaven-headed autept was linked in parallel to his neighbour by a sheaf of coloured ribbon-cables, and their already phenomenal computational power was enhanced still further by the shared mindspace he had created in his most powerful data engine. Working as one linked brain, their eyes closed to keep all non-essential sensory inputs to a minimum, they crunched the vast array of arithmetical data and hexamathic geometries he needed to keep control of the building power.

Thamatica was certain he had the variables worked out of the experiment; it was all a matter of managing colossal power inputs and balancing them against the titanic energy requirements. His theory was sound, but Thamatica knew that theory had a perverse way of not matching up to practice.

A dozen servitors stripped of their mechanised parts – as far as was practical – maintained the machinery of the experiment in close proximity to the two rapidly rotating spheres. Thamatica didn't dare approach too close to the machine; he was far too augmented to survive such conflicting magnetic fields. The energy would literally tear him limb from limb.

He checked the cascades of data on the numerous panels, giving each one a cursory inspection, but enough to satisfy himself that everything was as it should be. This was a highly dangerous experiment, but Thamatica's sense for such things had diminished in the wake of every mechanical augmentation he had undergone. Ferrus Manus himself had often spoken with the Iron Fraternity of that reduced humanity, of its dangers and its potential to erode their human compassion, but any thoughts of acting upon that warning had been swept aside

in the wake of his death.

The thought of his primarch's murder left Thamatica strangely cold, and in his darker moments he had begun to question the wisdom of his Legion's chosen path to enhanced augmentation. He had seen a direct correlation between the lack of human empathy in a warrior and the level of bionic enhancements he had undergone. It could be a fascinating avenue of research, but now was not the time for such indulgences.

In times of war, the Iron Fraternity were more concerned with the construction of weapons than with matters of philosophy. Such things were the purview of the Librarius, or at least they would have been had the Iron Hands ever possessed such an institution.

He shook off such tangential thoughts and returned to the matter in hand. The power levels were all approaching the regions the calculus-logi had extrapolated that he would require and the magnetic field strength was stable. As he had said to Wayland, he required bigger generators, and had linked his experimental machinery to the plasma drives, diverting their power to his laboratorium. On some level he knew he should have sought permission from Cadmus Tyro for that, but the irascible captain would only have refused.

Where was the sense in asking for what would almost certainly be denied?

'Yes,' he said to himself. 'Yes, this will work. And even if it doesn't, it's always easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.'

Thamatica pushed the activation button on his console, coupling the engine outputs to the machinery empowering his device. The readouts all began to climb, and Thamatica recorded them all through the data-capture optics in his bionic eye.

Lightning arced between the two spheres, a dancing web of eye-watering brightness. Three of the servitors were immolated by backwashing electrical discharge before self-preservation protocols made the others back away. The power contained there could vaporise the entire ship, and Thamatica began to channel that power into the experimental machinery that would begin the quantum swapping between the two spheres.

All he had to do was throw the two switches that would complete the circuit.

His hands hovered over the switches as a moment of doubt nested in the back of his mind.

'What if this goes wrong?' he said, turning to the gibbering calculus-logi autepts.

They had no answer for him, only waste numbers and remainders.

The flow of hexamathical calculus was reassuring in its simplicity, and Thamatica let out a relieved breath. He nodded and waved a hand as if silencing their admonition.

‘Of course, yes, you’re right,’ he said. ‘What purpose is served by timidity?’

He closed the switches and a thunderous bang echoed as the power levels spiked vertiginously. Relays blew out in an instant and lightning strikes whipped out in streaks of blazing energy and seismic detonation.

‘You bloody fool, Thamatica!’ he shouted as the calculus-logi shrieked with one voice and their shared mindspace blew out in a surge of feedback. All thirty slumped over, blood streaming from their fried brain cavities and smoke boiling from their skulls. It was impossible to know how far overloaded the system was: every needle and readout had melted.

Thamatica looked towards the two spheres. Blinding light flowed between them and the servitors were gone, immolated by the expanding ball of electromagnetic fire. How this version of his experiment could have gone wrong was a question for another day, and Thamatica slammed his palm down on the emergency shutdown.

The power to the devices surrounding the spheres was cut off in an instant, and a billow of electrically charged air was all that remained of the potentially catastrophic power surge. Thamatica let out a sigh of relief and frustration, scanning the ruined console before him to see what, if anything, could be salvaged from this latest setback.

Almost nothing remained of his data recorders, but the one surviving gauge told him exactly where the vast quantities of power vented from the experiment had gone and what it would look like to any other ship in the vicinity.

‘Ah, electromagnetic venting,’ he said. ‘That’s not good. That’s not good at all.’

THIRTEEN

Back from the Brink

Unmasked

Attack Orders

It felt like waking from a nightmare, then realising the nightmare had followed him from sleep. Soltarn Vull Bronn's skull throbbed as though it had been filled with boiling vapour, a pressurised container with no way to vent. He groaned. His mouth felt sticky, like he'd been force-fed gallons of syrupy food paste. His eyes were gummed shut, his throat raw and constricted.

What had happened to him?

He felt hollow, as though the most potent purgatives had flushed his system and left him drained of energy and shivering. Bright light was spearing through his eyelids, straight into his brain, which felt like a Dreadnought was crushing it in its motorised fist. Every nerve felt as though it were pushing out through his skin, such that every contact was painful.

'He's waking up,' said a voice, gravelly and coarse.

'I wasn't sure he would,' said another.

'Didn't hit him that hard,' growled yet another.

He tried to make sense of what he was hearing. The cold, echoing hum of machinery and the bite of counterseptic and formaldehyde suggested an apothecarion, but the rough voices and scrape of armour plates and gun oil suggested a legionary's arming chamber.

'Where am I?' he said, his voice a strangled, dry wheeze.

'Aboard the *Iron Blood*,' said the first voice. 'In the apothecarion.'

At least he'd got that right.

'Why am I here? What happened?'

He opened his eyes, squinting against the glare of stark lumen strips and reflected light from brushed-steel cabinets and glass tubes of suspended flesh and replacement organs.

‘We were hoping you could tell us.’

The owner of the voice leaned over him, and he recognised Soulaka. The Apothecary was a warrior of Warsmith Toramino’s Grand Battalion and the current Honourable of the Dodekatheon, an honorific he actually deserved if rumour were to be believed.

Vull Bronn sat up, his body as weak as the day he had woken after the implantation of the black carapace. His limbs shivered and the muscles felt abused and stretched beyond their ability to endure. Hands reached out to steady him.

Warsmith Forrix stood to one side of the reinforced gurney upon which he sat, one arm holding tightly to his bicep. The grip was light but painful, and Vull Bronn pulled away.

By the wide doors of the apothecarion stood a bland-faced legionary with long hair worn in an elaborate braid over the right side of his skull. His face was familiar, but Vull Bronn couldn’t place it until he reached up to rub the tender skin at his jawline.

‘You struck me,’ he said, remembering the piledriver blow that had put him down.

‘You’re welcome,’ said Cadaras Grendel.

‘What?’ snapped Vull Bronn, wincing as the hammering in his skull intensified. ‘I should kill you for that.’

‘I think in this case we can forgo a disciplinary,’ said Forrix.

‘He struck a superior officer!’ protested Vull Bronn.

‘You really don’t remember what happened, do you?’ grinned the insufferable Grendel, his louche grin spreading wider. ‘That stuff Eidolon gave you must have been hellish strong.’

‘Eidolon?’ said Vull Bronn as a memory surfaced like a bloated body in water. ‘I remember smoking something. There was drink too, I think. Something made from tears, he said.’

‘It is likely that Legionary Grendel saved your life,’ said Soulaka, extruding a hypo-syringe from his gauntlet narthecium. Vull Bronn felt the prick of the needle in his shoulder and a warmth spread from the insertion point. Almost immediately, his thoughts cleared and the pain in his skull began to recede as his body’s healing mechanisms were chemically kicked into high gear. His skin felt hot and beads of oily toxins sweated from his pores.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

‘I’m not sure any of us do,’ said Forrix, circling the gurney and studying him

as though unsure whether to welcome him back to the Legion or clap him in irons. ‘I don’t know what they were doing to you, Stonewrought, but I think Grendel stopped you from becoming like them.’

Vull Bronn could barely remember anything of the meeting in *La Fenice*, but just the thought of being part of it revolted him. His gorge rose and he fought down a wave of sickness, gripping the edge of the gurney to keep his stomach contents where they belonged.

‘Something vile has taken root in the Emperor’s Children,’ said Forrix. ‘We all knew it the minute we saw Fulgrim’s carnivalia on Hydra Cordatus, but it’s worse than any of us feared.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Soulaka.

‘He means that the rumours we’ve been hearing are more than just rumours,’ said Perturabo, ducking his head as he entered the apothecarion, followed by three of the Iron Circle. The chamber had felt cramped before, but with the primarch and his shield-bearing bodyguards it felt positively claustrophobic.

‘Rumours, my lord?’ said Vull Bronn. ‘What rumours?’

‘The ones that circulated after Isstvan V,’ said Perturabo. ‘Wild stories of orgiastic worship of old gods and daemons. Of sorcery and sacrifice.’

‘But surely rumour is all they were?’ said Forrix, offended by the notion. ‘We’re not actually thinking there *are* ancient powers in the warp? Whatever’s going on with the Emperor’s Children, it’s madness, some new obsession with perfection on the Phoenician’s part. But that’s all it is.’

Perturabo hesitated. ‘I tried to deny it, to rationalise it as a sickness of the mind, but having seen what has become of the III Legion and hearing what Cadaras Grendel had to say about events on the *Pride of the Emperor*, it’s clear Fulgrim believes he serves these daemon gods.’

‘Gods?’ said Vull Bronn, not wanting to accept this, but feeling a dreadful sense of the truth of it by saying the words aloud. ‘Sorcery and daemonic powers?’

‘I agree, it sounds like insanity, but if Fulgrim and his Legion have embraced this belief, then we have to take it seriously.’

‘I remember… monsters,’ he said. ‘Eidolon called them terata. He said they were the bastard by-blows of Apothecary Fabius.’

‘Fabius is creating new life-forms?’ said Soulaka. ‘What were they?’

‘Diabolical things, hybrid melds of surgical mutilation and genetic nightmare.’

Vull Bronn swallowed, the taste bilious and repellent as the memory of deformed slaves and their wanton disfigurements arose in his mind. The horror

of the III Legion's revels lodged like a knife in the guts and he fell back on the first tenets of the Iron Warriors.

'From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will,' he said, as a wave of nausea threatened to overcome him. 'From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron.'

'May it forever be so,' said Soulaka, completing the catechism and leaning in close to Vull Bronn. 'But tell me more of these new life-forms, they sound fascinating.'

'Forget them, Soulaka,' said Perturabo, lifting Vull Bronn's head and turning it from side to side. 'Nothing good can come of such tampering, but Fabius's alchemy is potent if his drugs can fell an Iron Warrior.' His face hardened to granite. 'I don't pretend to understand what's happening to my brother's Legion, but we'll send no more of our warriors to their depraved meetings. Whatever corruption has taken Fulgrim's warriors will not take mine.'

'So what do we do now?' asked Forrix.

'I will have words with my brother,' said Perturabo.

Barban Falk paced the length of the *Iron Blood*'s bridge, clad in his Mark IV plate, his hands laced behind his back. He paused to watch the maddening swirl of nameless colours and the play of tempestuous thunderheads that boomed and clashed beyond the viewscreen. The Eye of Terror – as it now appeared on the astrogation charts – was a raging holocaust of immaterial energies, but the course plots being fed from the *Andronicus* and its alien navigator were following realspace veins that threaded its turbulent depths with aplomb.

Though it went against his every instinct to trust an eldar guide, Falk was forced to admit that the Paths Above were as calm as any inter-system flight path he had plied, and they had not lost one of the hundreds of ships in their fleet. As best they could, the data engines of the *Iron Blood* were recording their course, though Falk suspected that this pathway would only remain viable for as long as their mission took to complete.

It irked Falk to be alone on the bridge, but while Kroeger established his presence with his Grand Battalion and Forrix inveigled himself with the primarch, at least one of the Trident needed to be here. The *Iron Blood*'s captain, a mechanised hybrid named Bahdet Vort, kept them on course, his body largely subsumed into the devotional altar from which the vessel was steered. Falk ignored the steady stream of correctional data from the captain and resumed his pacing, feeling his gaze again drawn to the boiling miasma of swirling light and

undying energies that seethed beyond the fragile protection of the ship's protective fields.

Here and there patterns formed and dissolved, patterns that looked like faces, eyes and a thousand other elements of human features. All random and all illusory, for the warp was a realm of fantasy, a little understood realm of shifting and treacherous space where nothing was as it seemed and little could be taken at face value.

Standard practice while traversing warp currents was to keep the oculus sealed off from the immaterial currents raging outside, but given the safety of their route Falk had kept the bridge shutters open. The interior of a starship was such a drab, functional place, and the shimmering oil-slick colours bathing the bridge space in wondrous spirals of light and hues to which he could give no name were a pleasing diversion.

Falk halted in the centre of the bridge, letting servitor cant, binaric mumblings and the clatter of data-engine coils wash over him as he peered into the depths of the storm. As if reacting to his scrutiny, the currents before the ship slithered and spun into new and ever more elaborate forms. Lines and curves intersected, a haphazard collection of randomly assembled angles. Meaningless in themselves, but as Falk stared harder, they began to cohere into something tangible.

Beyond the apparent chaos of the whorls of light and dark, Falk saw the fleeting impression of a grinning face. A skull, like that worn on both the shoulder guards of his warplate. He blinked and the image was gone. His mouth was suddenly dry, but he wasn't even sure what he'd seen.

If he'd seen anything at all.

He stared at the churning warp pocket where he thought he'd seen the skull, but the lines and curves and angles refused to come together. He looked away from the viewscreen, staring at the beaten iron wall of the bridge. Patterns of fabrication striations and micro-cracks in the metal seemed to writhe beneath his gaze, the fractal crazing of the metal leaping into clarity and displaying the same skull he had seen in the depths of the warp.

Falk gritted his teeth and looked away.

In the intersecting lines of latticed girders he saw it again. In the scores creased into the leather of his gauntlets, its hollow eye sockets regarded him strangely, like a stranger refusing to break eye contact. Once seen, the skull could not be *un*seen, and Falk felt a mounting panic as the scuff marks on the iron deck plates and the chevroning of gold and black eased into the shape of the leering skull. He fought to calm his breathing, knowing that the warp could play

tricks on the brain, that its ill-understood physics were capable of twisting the mind's perceptions of reality.

'Seal the bridge,' he said. 'Shutters down.'

The grinding shutters concertinaed over the viewing bay but as they drew closed Falk's eyes narrowed and he held up his hand as he saw a brilliant flare of energised light bloom from ahead of the *Iron Blood* like a newborn star.

'Hold. Reopen shutters.'

The shutters pulled back with a groan of protest, and Falk marched down to the surveyor station as a chime of detection sounded. He scanned the readings on the forward auspex and felt a mounting exhilaration seize him. He pressed a finger to his gorget.

'Lord Perturabo?' he said. 'We're not alone here.'

'What in the name of the primarch just happened?' demanded Cadmus Tyro, striding towards the station normally occupied by Frater Thamatica, but which was now manned by Sabik Wayland.

Wayland wished he had an answer. Red light after red light appeared on the steel-panelled display before him, each one a vital ship system going offline.

'I'm not sure, captain,' said Wayland. 'The engine cores registered a critical reactor spike and automatically triggered the venting protocols. They've shut down almost every onboard system until the energy levels have bled off enough to restore them safely.'

'Where did that reactor spike come from?'

Wayland scrolled through the last fifteen minutes of engine data, seeing output readings that were far in excess of what the *Sisypheum*'s current speed would suggest. Each engine core was operating well below its capability during the delicate manoeuvres through the Paths Below, but they were still generating colossal amounts of energy. With a sinking feeling, Wayland suspected he knew full well where that power had been diverted to.

'Thamatica, you damn fool,' he said.

'What?' demanded Tyro, and his eagle took wing at his fury. 'What's that bloody maniac gone and done now?'

'I think the Frater has made a second attempt to get his thermic displacement beamer operational. He said he needed bigger generators and I believe he's been bleeding engine power to his laboratorium.'

'Thamatica!' yelled Tyro over the ship's vox. 'What have you done to my ship? Get up here now so I can beat you to death!'

No answer was forthcoming, and Tyro again rounded on Wayland as emergency lights fired up with a thrum of engaging circuits, bathing the bridge in a red glow. Wayland bent to his terminal, culling every last shred of diagnostic data he could still bring up. He saw the subtlety with which Thamatica had concealed his siphoning of reactor energy, how he had generated an exponentially vast build-up of power, and the catastrophic diversion of feedback at his experiment's conclusion.

'What's he done to us?' demanded Vermanus Cybus, already trying to restore the ship's weapon systems. 'I can't get any power to the gun batteries.'

'The venting protocols have taken everything out,' said Wayland, looking at zeroed output levels across the board. 'We're dead in the void.'

'Damn him, I'll have his head for this,' said Tyro.

'There's more,' said Wayland. 'And you're not going to like it.'

'What?'

'Venting that much electromagnetic energy into space is like lighting a clan's beacon fire,' said Wayland. 'Any ship within a hundred light years will probably have seen it.'

'The traitors? They'll know we're here?'

'Almost certainly.'

Tyro spun away from him and shouted over to the navigational pod where Varuchi Vohra sat. The eldar scholar rose from the reclined couch and gracefully made his way towards the incensed captain of the *Sisypheum*.

'The Paths Above and the Paths Below, how distant are they?'

Vohra spread his hands and then spiralled them around one another.

'The question is not easy to answer,' he said. 'In a tempest such as this, distance is a relative term. One might as well ask how distant is a dream from wakefulness.'

'I don't need bloody poetry,' snapped Tyro. 'Give me a straight answer or I'll put a bolt through your skull right now. Will they be close enough to have seen our engine flare?'

'If they have eyes in the void, then they will have seen it, yes,' said Varuchi Vohra.

Tyro ran over to the surveyor station, one of the few systems spared the blackout of the reactor spike. The display was cascading gibberish, a flickering, static-laced nightmare of meaningless returns and confused imagery the surveyors could not interpret. In the midst of a warp storm, conventional auspex readings were all but useless, and only the unique mutation of a Navigator could

hope to steer a ship through its immaterial currents.

Right now, Tyro needed something, anything, to tell him where the enemy were.

Waves of white noise and distortion washed through the auspex, but just for an instant the slate cleared and Tyro had a fleeting glimpse of the local spatial environment. The threat board lit up as it took a snapshot of the returns it was getting from its passive sensors.

Tyro's blood chilled, as if he were standing next to the stasis casket of Ulrach Branthan.

Over three hundred capital-class contacts, dead astern on a low parallel vector.

Two forward picket ships, strike cruisers at least, closing on surging intercept vectors.

And the *Sisypheum* drifting without power, helpless as an infant shard-wyrm in a snare.

'Battle stations!' shouted Cadmus Tyro. 'Enemy ships inbound.'

Perturabo watched the replay of what the prow auspex had recorded at the farthest extent of its range, a distorted inload of aberrant data and meaningless warp interference. Then, at precisely the same moment each time, the sudden brightness of an electromagnetic pulse. Frequencies, radiance and nuclear spectra cascaded from the brightness, and Perturabo let the data lodge in the deep seams of his cognitive strata.

'It's an enemy ship,' said Forrix, his surprise evident.

'Do we know whose?' asked Kroeger.

'It's an Iron Hands vessel,' said Perturabo, tracing a finger down the streams of data as the recording looped once more.

'Tenth Legion?' said Forrix. 'The assassins on Hydra Cordatus were Iron Hands.'

'One of them was,' corrected Perturabo. 'But this is the ship they came from, I *know* it.'

The primarch paused the expanding halo of energy flaring from the Iron Hands ship, wondering how the Medusan warriors could have been so careless as to allow such a visible sign of their presence.

'Not like the Tenth to make a mistake like that,' noted Kroeger.

'My thoughts exactly,' said Perturabo. 'Under normal operational circumstances I might say it was too convenient for them to reveal themselves so blatantly, but I don't think this is a trap, I think we've just been handed a golden

opportunity.’

‘I have a fix on their last position,’ said Falk, standing beside Vort’s command altar. ‘We’re at the forefront of the fleet and we’ll be within range in a few minutes.’

Perturabo nodded, then bent to the console with the frozen image of the expanding electromagnetic pulse. His eyes narrowed as he parsed the data and tapped the screen thoughtfully. He looked up into the maddening squalls and tempests raging outside, seeing a cold logic and order in the seething nuclear heart of the storm, idiot sentience given rudimentary form by the very flecks of insignificance that plied its immaterial currents.

Voyaging within the Eye of Terror had only increased his feeling of being studied, as though the eternal chaos of the storm had folded in on itself to regard the interlopers within its forbidden heart.

None of his gene-sons could know the warp as he did: they had not heard its siren song since their earliest days. To them, the Eye of Terror was an impenetrable hellstorm, a strange and mysterious phenomenon. A spatial hazard to be avoided.

To Perturabo it was a remnant of the galaxy’s ancient symphony, the background noise to existence itself and the fading echoes of creation music from the dawn of time.

‘My lord?’ said Forrix. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘Something’s awry,’ said Perturabo, a fresh suspicion forming in his mind like a coy secret that would only reveal itself if properly coaxed. ‘What am I seeing here? There’s something… something that shouldn’t *be*…’

He looked past the obvious signs of a ship in distress and let his burgeoning suspicion grow and develop without conscious direction. The solution would come, this thought that tugged at his subconscious, but only when it was ready.

An ascending tritone from behind announced an incoming communication from the Emperor’s Children fleet. Perturabo knew who it would be before Barban Falk confirmed it.

‘Vox-hail from the *Pride of the Emperor.* Lord Fulgrim wishes to speak to you, my lord.’

Perturabo nodded and a pellucid green form appeared above the hard-light projector embedded in the deck before the viewscreen. The Phoenician was clad in his voluminous robes, with fire-wreathed cherubim bearing his trailing cloak and winged battle helm.

‘You have seen it?’ breathed Fulgrim, his voice hoarse with excitement.

‘We have, brother,’ replied Perturabo. ‘We will be in firing range in moments.’

‘Firing range? Surely you can’t mean to simply destroy this ship?’

‘Of course, what else would I do?’

‘The *Andronicus* is preparing boarding craft to capture it,’ said Fulgrim, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. ‘You must have seen that this is one of the Gorgon’s ships?’

‘Tenth Legion, yes. What of it?’

‘I would not pass up this chance to humble poor dead Ferrus’s men again,’ said Fulgrim.

‘No,’ said Perturabo. ‘As soon as we have a firing solution, the *Iron Blood* will blow that ship out of the void.’

Fulgrim’s image managed to look suitably disappointed. ‘Aren’t you the least bit curious as to how they came to be ahead of us? Who they are and why they are here?’

‘No.’

‘Really? Karuchi Vohra says they may have a guide like him aboard.’

‘All the more reason to destroy it immediately.’

‘Permit me this one indulgence,’ pouted Fulgrim’s shimmering form. ‘If it were an Imperial Fists vessel, I doubt you would be so quick to arm the bombardment cannons. You would be aboard that lumbering Stormbird of yours and already looking for a breaching point.’

Perturabo cut the link between the *Iron Blood* and the *Pride of the Emperor*. He turned to Barban Falk and said, ‘As soon as you have a firing solution, destroy the enemy ships.’

‘My lord?’ said Falk. ‘Ships?’

Perturabo nodded, now understanding the substance of his suspicion, returning his gaze to the looping pict recording of the electromagnetic pulse. Yes, a shadow in the flare of light, a hint of darkness where no darkness ought to be.

A reflection in the mirror of the maelstrom where nothing should exist to be reflected.

‘One of them’s running,’ said Perturabo, ‘but there are *two* ships out there.’

The attack order went out and the Emperor’s Children responded with perfect speed.

The embarkation deck of the *Andronicus* was chaotic with warbands fighting to get to the Stormbirds and boarding-torpedoes. The caged raptors of attack craft were loaded on their guide rails, freshly-daubed in their new colours –

shocking pinks, electric blues and neon yellows. Great banners of skin and silk billowed from the iron rafters in roasting thermals as engines thundered to life.

Lucius sprinted through the throng, heading for the nearest Stormbird.

A helpless enemy ship – the best kind of enemy ship – drifted in the void within reach of the picket and its crew were just waiting to be plucked. His swords practically danced in their scabbards, and though he told himself that their eagerness was just his imagination, he could no longer quite convince himself. His armour glistened with flesh-grease, and the blood from his fresh facial scars was still sticky on the defaced eagle at the centre of his breastplate.

Lucius vaulted onto the assault ramp of the Stormbird and, certain he had secured his place in the initial wave of boarding craft, turned to see who else would be joining him. The Legion's warriors scrambled and fought to be the first to get to grips with the enemy. Their devotions had been turned inwards since Prismatica, and the chance to bathe in the screams of the enemy was too delicious to pass up.

Marius Vairosean blared a path to a waiting Stormbird, his Kakophoni roaring behind him with their madly skirling sonic cannons screaming and wailing like a chorus of the damned. Bastarnae Abranxe had fought his way to a craft, together with his consort Lonomia Ruen. Abranxe saw him and raised a sword. A challenge or a salute, Lucius didn't care.

Lucius's gaze was drawn to a boarding torpedo at the far end of the deck, isolated from the others like a plague victim. No one fought to reach this craft, for the solitary figure of Apothecary Fabius stood before it, calmly directing the motion of a heavy lifter rig as it manoeuvred a gigantic container from the depths of the ship. Labelled with all manner of biohazard symbols, even the sensation-seeking Emperor's Children knew to keep away from the dreadful things birthed in Fabius's bedlam chambers.

Flesh-hooded servitors guided the biological container forwards like the slaves of some ancient monument builder. They secured it within the torpedo's interior and Fabius climbed in after it, sealing the blast shutters behind him.

'What are you up to, you old necromancer?' wondered Lucius, his interest piqued.

He heard the percussive booms of hatches sealing behind fully laden boarding torpedoes, and grinned as he ducked back into the red-lit interior of the crew compartment. Dozens of Emperor's Children were lashing themselves to the gravity harnesses, cutting their palms with the teeth of their chainblades, rocking back and forth in pent-up excitement or howling like maddened wolves in the

fold. The assault ramp swung up and Lucius felt the Stormbird strain against the clamps of its launch rail. Quickly he found an empty seat, and strapped himself in as the growling, vibrating attack craft was finally unleashed.

Powerful engines spat the Stormbird into the calm void between the *Andronicus* and its victim. Powerful G-forces pinned Lucius to his seat and he licked blood from his lips.

His swords were drawn, though he had no memory of unsheathing them.

He spat onto the blades, laughing as pleasure sang through his body.

Perturabo cursed as he saw the *Andronicus* swing around with a surge of corrective burn to put itself between the *Iron Blood* and the drifting vessel of the X Legion.

'Damn you, brother,' hissed Perturabo.

'I have a firing solution,' said Barban Falk.

Perturabo shook his head. 'You'd hit the *Andronicus*,' he said.

'Fulgrim ordered his ship to block our shot,' growled Forrix.

'Almost certainly,' agreed Perturabo.

'He knew we were going to open fire,' said Kroeger. 'I say we shoot anyway. It's their own damn fault if their ship gets hit.'

Perturabo chewed the proposition over, the greater part of him wanting to give the order and damn the consequences. Fulgrim had descended into terrifying depths of egomania, and who knew what his newfound beliefs in daemons and gods might compel him to do if he felt he was being attacked. Such narcissists could twist any accidental or imagined slight into the grossest insult, and lighting the spark of a void war between two whole Legions in the Eye of Terror probably wasn't wise.

'No,' said Perturabo. 'Such an act will break our fragile alliance for certain, and I've still to learn what my brother is really after.'

'He defied you!' snarled Forrix. 'He has earned retribution.'

'Enough,' said Perturabo, drawing *Forgebreaker* from its shoulder harness. 'If Fulgrim wants to capture this vessel, then we will not let him have all the glory.'

Kroeger was the first to grasp the implication of his words.

'I will ready the Stormbirds,' he said, heading for the armoured doors to the bridge. 'We'll be ready to launch within ten minutes.'

'No,' said Perturabo. 'This will be over by then.'

'What about that second ship?' said Forrix.

'It's already gone,' said Perturabo. 'Whoever it was, they don't want any part

of this fight yet. If we want to take the iron to the stone, we have to do it now.’

‘My lord,’ said Forrix, a note of warning in his voice as he realised what Perturabo intended. ‘So close to the edges of warp interference? Without fixed lock points? The risks are too great.’

‘Fulgrim may have started this, but we’ll damn well finish it,’ said Perturabo, turning to Barban Falk. ‘Bring us in above the enemy ship and power up the teleport chambers.’

FOURTEEN

Here be Monsters

You Wounded Me

The Circle is Complete

The impacts were deafening, filling the superstructure of the *Sisypheum* with ringing echoes of metal on metal. Interior bulkheads crumpled like sheet foil with the force of the boarding torpedoes slamming into the wallowing ship's flank. Layered steel and ceramite broke apart as the blunt snouts of the torpedoes tore into the greatest void within the Iron Hands ship: its embarkation deck.

Magna-melta blasts exploded from the torpedoes' frontal sections, and assault launchers scattered cones of red-hot shrapnel before them. Little additional damage was caused, as Cadmus Tyro had ordered the deck emptied of trans-atmospheric craft in anticipation of such an attack. The rotating razor-cogs of the boarding-torpedoes ground to a halt and their locking bolts blew off in sequence.

Vermanus Cybus issued the attack order with a synapse pulse through the MIU implant in his skull. No sooner had his orders been received than the blast shutters at the edge of the embarkation deck slammed up into their housings, and two dozen Rhinos of ebony and iron raced towards the boarding torpedoes. Cybus would mount no static defence of his ship, but a stinging counter-attack.

He rode atop his heavily modified command Rhino, secured in the cupola by the magnetic clamps on his mechanised lower body. He mashed the firing triggers of the pintle-mounted storm bolters, sending chugging streams of contrails playing over the worm-like maws of the torpedoes. Streams of bolter shells blistered the scorched outer armour of the torpedoes as shielded storm-turrets rotated clear of their housings and returned fire.

Up-armoured and driven over the debris of the torpedoes' entry at engine-shredding speed, none of the racing vehicles were stopped. Internal blast shutters blew out from the torpedoes and a roar of animalistic hatred echoed from within, like the hideous, cave-dwelling ferro-drakes of Karaashi. Cybus slewed his

Rhino to a halt as the snouts of the torpedoes fell away and assault ramps slammed down onto the blasted deck plates.

‘Incoming!’ he yelled across a variety of wavelengths. ‘The iron endures!’

The crew doors of the Rhinos slammed back and black-armoured warriors disembarked from their vehicles, nearly two hundred battle-brothers moving forwards to occupy positions of cover amid fallen stanchions, ruptured deck plates and toppled bulkheads.

A howling mass of twisted flesh and sutured armour vomited from the interior of the torpedo that had impacted first, a hundred or more… *things* that were unlike anything Cybus had ever seen. His artificial eyes were capable of rendering visual information in multiple spectra and with incredible clarity, but right now he wished they were not.

No two of the monsters were alike, hybrid things of glistening flesh, distorted anatomies and swollen muscle. Their limbs were elongated, bladed and chained with whirling hooks. They moved with astounding speed, some on limbs like organic piston springs, others with the ruddy haunches of powerful beasts of burden. Like wax effigies left too close to a heat lamp, their plasticised bodies were molten amalgams of a hundred conjoined anatomies, genetically manipulated abominations that should never have been given life.

But worse than all their deformities and abnormalities was the stark fact that their bodies had clearly once been Space Marines. No mortal flesh could have borne such torturous cellular mutilation and survived. The gunfire from the Iron Hands slackened as that awful truth slammed home, and the monsters seized that momentary lapse in discipline to close the distance between the two forces with terrifying speed.

Perhaps a score were cut down in a stuttered volley of fire as the Iron Hands recovered from their shock. Explosive fire and close-range missile blasts reduced the dead to component organs, but it was nowhere near enough to stop the tide of aberrant flesh.

The monsters struck the Iron Hands in knots of stone-hard muscle and bone.

Cassander had been gene-crafted to dismiss the debilitating effects of fear. His physiology was engineered to block the chemical and neurological responses to the emotion and his mind had been trained to resist its touch. He had waged the Emperor's wars for hundreds of years and had never let the many terrors of the galaxy keep him from his mission.

But nothing had prepared him for this.

This was fighting against the warriors he still called brothers.

In the wake of his failed vengeance on Fabius, the demented slave servitors had hurled him into one of the sepulchral, iron-walled chambers with a host of snuffling, stinking beasts. He expected them to attack, to fall upon him with their anatomically impossible weapon-limbs and tear him apart.

Instead they had accepted him as one of their own.

Only then had Cassander understood that these *abominations* had once been Legion warriors like him. Whatever Legion they had once been, they were now appalling monsters with drooling, fang-filled mouths and ragged talons. Surgical and genetic deviants, monsters with only the last vestiges of their humanity remaining.

Only then had he seen how ravaged and distorted his own body had become.

Bloated beyond recognition and discoloured from the poisonous filth and biological agents injected into his body, his flesh was now a mockery of its once proud perfection. He saw the swelling in his muscles, the hardness of his skin and the distended protrusion of his bones at every joint.

The monsters didn't attack him, because he was one of them.

Kept like exotic beasts in a menagerie, they were fed a nutrient-rich gruel that Cassander alone seemed to understand was laced with growth hormones and gene-triggers that enhanced their aggression and strength. Fights and bloodshed were endemic after each serving, and numerous times Cassander was forced to defend the portion of the chamber's floor upon which he curled up to sleep.

He had ignored the gruel, though his stomach rebelled at his fasting. His reforged physiology demanded feeding, and he could feel its hothoused metabolism beginning to devour itself. This was a good thing. It meant an end to his suffering.

He would die and this nightmare would end.

Then he remembered his words to Navarra and the credo of the Fists, each of Rogal Dorn's tenets hammered through his skull as though driven by the fist of

the Emperor himself.

Determination, self-reliance and steadfastness.

Honour, duty and the ability to endure anything.

Cassander ate sparingly, digesting only enough to keep his strength up and fighting to control the sudden urges to do harm to those around him. His moods swung violently, and it took every last scrap of his mental fortitude to hold onto the things that made him who he was – a warrior of the Legiones Astartes and a proud son of Rogal Dorn.

Time held even less meaning for him in this twilight world of savagery, and then came the moment when the bulkhead doors had been thrown open and they had been herded into an electrified channel that led to a hot tube of iron that boomed and shook as though being shot from the barrel of an artillery piece.

Thunderous impact, an ultra-rapid deceleration. Sequenced blasts of super-heated air forced them to the front of the tube in a crammed mass of howling rage. Ceiling-mounted atomisers filled the air with chem-stimms that made Cassander's eyes bleed and his blood pulse in time with a booming thunder in his chest. Both his hearts were now beating. He felt light-headed and the oxygen-rich soup of his altered bloodwork was making him dizzy with fear and anger. The potent mix of shrieking emotions swelled his already fearsomely proportioned musculature with adrenal boosters and rage-inducing stimulants.

The bulkhead wall that penned them in rose up, and bright light flooded the iron tube in which they had been confined. A stampede of howling monsters charged from the interior, mindless and fuelled by alchemical rage. Ahead, warriors in black warplate fired heavy guns that tore through the first monsters to escape their captivity. The smell of their blood and their bodies' interior cavities filled Cassander's newly awakened senses with a need to tear the flesh from their bones.

He fought against the sensation, but was carried into the warriors in black despite his reluctance to approach them. He knew he should recognise them. He knew they were not his enemy, that they were brothers, yet what his brain was telling him and what his body demanded were two very different things. Cassander watched his fellow monsters kill with sweeps of taloned paws or with a toxic vomit of bilious fluids.

This was not warfare as waged by the Legions, it was degenerate slaughter. All around Cassander, bolter fire was wreaking a bloody toll on the monsters, blowing out plugs of flesh or mushrooming from spines in gouts of stinking blood. He fought to keep clear of the swirling melee, but inevitably he found

himself face to face with a warrior in gleaming black plate and a fist of purest silver steel. Cassander threw up his arms, fighting down the urge to rip this warrior's head off.

'Iron Hand!' he yelled. 'I am of the Legions!'

His words were mangled by the genetic reshaping of his jawbone, and if the warrior understood him, he gave no sign. The legionary's bolter erupted with flame, and Cassander buckled as the shot struck him square in the centre of his chest. The pain was incredible, but instead of blowing him apart from the inside, the shell deflected from his freshly ossified bone carapace.

Cassander roared and plucked the bolter from the iron grip of the Space Marine. He snapped the weapon in two and hurled away the broken halves before leaping at the unarmed warrior. One blow broke his helmet open, another ripped it from the gorget. Pneumatic gases hissed around the revealed features, part augmetic, part flesh.

Cassander's rage faltered in the face of his opponent's hatred.

The Space Marine suddenly had a long combat blade in his hand and drove it into Cassander's flank. The tip scraped along the bone shield before finding a weak spot and punching into one of Cassander's lungs. Bloody spittle sprayed the Iron Hands legionary's face. Cassander reached down and took hold of the warrior's throat, pulling it out in a welter of glistening tubes and squirting arterial blood. With the last of his life the Space Marine stabbed Cassander twice more, but there was no strength behind the blows. The blade slipped from his fingers as the life went out of him.

Cassander rose to his feet, watching the coagulating blood fall from the ruin of tracheal tissue in his grip. He hurled it away, disgusted and horrified at what he had done. A servant of the Imperium was dead by his hands, and the enormity of the deed struggled to find a place in his mind where it could be understood.

Felix Cassander, captain of the Imperial Fists, had murdered a warrior of the Iron Hands. Oily tears streamed down his face, and his stomach lurched with revulsion. He threw back his head and howled as the battle swirled around him in bloodshed and violence.

Alone in the midst of the rampaging monsters, Cassander knew the true horror of what Apothecary Fabius had done to them.

The sudden shock of deceleration. The boom of locking bolts slamming back and the heat wash from a magna-melta. Stark light poured into the Stormbird as the ramp pistoned down, and Lucius waited until a good dozen of his fellow

warriors had stormed into the teeth of the Iron Hands guns before launching himself into the fray. No sense in being the chaff cut down in the first withering hails of gunfire, after all.

Thudding impacts spanked from the hull of the Stormbird, suppressing fire from Rhinos and static defences. The embarkation deck of a starship made an easy target from the point of view of getting assault craft on board, but they were well served by guns and defenders. Lucius scanned the placement of the Iron Hands in a heartbeat, a dispiriting lack of imagination in their arrangement. He saw Guilliman's prescriptive influence in the defences, and sneered at the Iron Hands desperate urge to follow someone new.

A shot clipped his shoulder, sending a burst of pain through him. More and more, it felt as though his armour were becoming part of him, like a hardened skin with receptors for pain and pleasure in equal measure. It was a welcome idea. He jumped aside as a vicious burst of autocannon fire sawed the length of the assault ramp. Sheeting sparks poured down like neon rain as explosive shells detonated in the midst of the charging Emperor's Children. A score of warriors were blown to shredded meat, another handful cut up with mechanical thoroughness. Blood sloshed from the ramp, but Lucius didn't spare a thought for the dead.

Four Stormbirds had breached the embarkation deck alongside a number of boarding torpedoes, and a fuzzed overlay on his visor told him another three had broken through in other areas of the enemy ship. This vessel was doomed, and all that remained was to make sport of its crew. More Emperor's Children were gaining the decks, but it was the tide of bestial monstrosities attacking the Iron Hands that demanded Lucius's attention.

He grinned as he saw Fabius at the top of the torpedo's ramp, like a proud parent watching his offspring. And what offspring! A wondrous menagerie of beautiful terata clearly crafted from the Legion gene-template: a tide of grotesquerie to match any carnivalia the Phoenician had yet mounted. They were terrible and incredible, and the scope of what Fabius had done was breathtaking.

A hulking brute whose smoking flesh was bright red and furnace hot slammed aside a Rhino like a paper toy, the vehicle's entire flank caved in. Its muscles were enormous, and a swinging fist hurled the armoured vehicle through the air to land thirty metres away in a smashed heap. Bolter fire tore its flesh, cutting grooves through the solid meat of its body. It roared, its eyes were swollen with blood, its muscles lathered in stinking excretions that reeked of boiled fat.

The Iron Hands scrambled to get away from the giant as it smashed another

Rhino to wreckage, wrenching the still-spinning driveshaft clear to wield as a giant club. Warriors worked in concerted groups to keep their distance while hammering it with explosive rounds from all sides.

Lucius sprinted into their midst, his swords cutting them to pieces with fluid, economical strokes. They turned to face him, all pistols and blades, but none were a match for him. He ducked a clumsy sweep of a chainblade, slashing his sword up through the warrior's elbow and spinning around to drive a second blade through the back of his neck and out through the faceplate of his helm.

More Emperor's Children joined the fight, a whooping, screeching band of maniacal killers led by Bastarnae Abranxe and Lonomia Ruen. Abranxe's two swords were darting blurs of steel, but Lucius wasn't impressed. Speed wasn't skill, and more often than not, his blows inflicted clumsy wounds with no finesse. Ruen fought with his hollow daggers, slender-bladed poniards that drooled hissing tears of venom. Those he wounded were left spasming in toxic convulsions, but few of his victims were killed. Perhaps that was the point.

Lucius left them to it, slipping through the fighting with an assassin's grace, his blades instruments of flamboyant murder. Bodies pressed in all around, but Lucius moved like smoke through the midst of struggling Iron Hands and Fabius's monstrous killers. The Iron Hands fought with a kind of mechanistic doggedness and took a good deal of killing. Lucius felt a giddy excitement when a warrior who should have died from the high cut to his neck and a simultaneous thrust up into the chest cavity clubbed him to the ground with an iron fist like a piledriving hammer.

He reeled from the blow, but recovered quickly as the warrior closed to finish him. Viscous fluid poured from his terrible wounds, but its shimmering petrochemical sheen told Lucius the blades had only split some mechanised component.

'There's barely enough flesh on you to kill,' he said, swaying aside from a clumsy chainsword sweep. Lucius spun on his heel and drove his elbow into the side of the warrior's helm. He staggered, but still didn't fall, even when Lucius rammed two swords into the warrior's gut. The Iron Hand bellowed something, but the words were little more than an unintelligible gargle. A bubbling, red-flecked froth sprayed from the grille of his faceplate and Lucius tasted the oil-rich texture of the blood.

Already bored of this fight, Lucius wrenched out his blades and brought them together in a scissoring movement that cut the Iron Hand's head from his shoulders. Lucius turned and ducked through the scrum of fighting, hoping for at

least one warrior aboard this ship who might at least give him a moment's distraction.

A nightmarish beast with the hooked arms of a gigantic mantis bounded into the midst of a scratch squad of Iron Hands and cut three down in as many sweeps of its powerful limbs. It howled as it killed, a plaintive cry that was part hatred, part anguish. Cybus swung the weapon-mount of his Rhino around and kept the floating reticule in his augmetic eyes married to its skull. A stream of guided bolter shells shredded its upper half in a confetti of rich red tissue.

Warriors encased in battle-plate the colours of fever dreams charged from smoke-wreathed assault craft. They bore the distinctive aquila upon their chests – albeit disfigured – which marked them as the Emperor's Children, but no other sign remained to identify them as that once proud Legion. Their armour was bedecked with skin fetishes and bloody trophies of war, crawling with obscene symbols and welded hooks.

Though his body had long ago eschewed the weakness of flesh for the purity of iron, hate flared in his heart at the sight of the Emperor's Children. These degenerate scum had murdered his primarch, and in that one moment, Vermanus Cybus had never felt more alive or been more human.

Before the betrayal at Isstvan, Cybus had fought beside the Phoenician's warriors on numerous occasions. He had always respected their devotion to the attainment of perfection, finding much to admire in their martial ethos. Many years ago, he had argued long into the night with a young officer named Rylanor on the merits of organic strength against augmented power, mocking the legionary's faith in his flesh while extolling the virtue of iron.

Was young Rylanor now among these degenerates? Would Cybus now have to kill a warrior he had once admired? The thought did not trouble him, and only served to vindicate his belief in the superiority of iron over blood and bone. The Emperor's Children spread out through the deck, firing wildly and howling a strange battle cant that tore at Cybus's augmetics and filled his skull with piercing static like a thousand screams.

Howls, shrieking blades and strobing flares of gunfire filled the embarkation deck as the Iron Hands fought the boarders in bloody close quarters. Mutant limbs and gene-spliced claws tore at war-forged battle-plate, and in return, chainswords and point-blank bolter fire ripped through the monsters' hideous bodies. Cybus played the fire of his storm bolters over them, seeing that some were falling without wounds caused by his own men. He saw one distorted

legionary collapse as his overwrought anatomy finally rebelled and combusted from within. Another simply exploded as rampant cellular mutation ripped him apart and transformed him into a writhing mass of jellied growths like a fleshy coral reef.

Cybus paused in his slaughter as he saw a figure in the midst of the beasts, an armoured warrior with a hideous contraption of blades, drills and clattering dissection tools at his shoulders like a surgical version of a servo-harness. He swung the cupola around, but the figure was obscured by his monstrous cohorts before he could fire.

Cybus dismissed the solitary figure and scanned the fighting with the calm awareness of a tactical planner in the barracks room. The monsters were contained for now, his warriors' resilience and their own biological instability keeping them from significant breakthroughs, but the Emperor's Children were in danger of overrunning the deck.

'First echelon, contain the right flank!' ordered Cybus as warriors in purple and gold and stretched skin moved to surround them. 'Reserve one, deploy now.'

The Rhinos swung around like a closing gate, moving in smooth support of their infantry while keeping punishing bursts of rounds chewing the Emperor's Children. Static guns and emplaced turrets flensed the open areas of the deck, pinning the flanking force in place while the Iron Hands redeployed.

Cybus allowed himself a moment of grim satisfaction.

The Emperor's Children would pay for their folly.

The battle ebbed and flowed below him, a swirling, heaving mass of rampaging fury, clinical tactical nous and theatrical flamboyance. As an exercise in different modes of fighting, it would have made a fascinating study, but Sharrowkyn was more interested in locating the nodal points of the enemy attack where a sudden strike would cause the most discord. He swung through the upper trusses and service gantries of the embarkation deck, always in motion and pausing only to assess the tactical situation.

Vermanus Cybus was an uncompromising man of little personal charisma, but he had a secutor's grasp of the methodology of combat. His warriors were reacting to every thrust of the Emperor's Children with alacrity and swift logic – even if the attackers were not fighting with logic as their guide.

If the architects of this assault had hoped to break the defenders in one punishing blow, they were to be sorely disappointed.

The monstrous things were being slowly beaten back, hot animalistic fury no

match for the icy calm and unbending nature of the Iron Hands. Sharrowkyn saw a number of Emperor's Children in the thick of the hardest fighting, and a brutish killer with two blades who bludgeoned a path through the defenders. A warrior in armour bedecked with spikes followed in his wake, fighting with a pair of daggers that were clearly envenomed.

But there was one warrior Sharrowkyn saw again and again who drew his attention the most, a swordsman of sublime skill. This warrior knew the gaps between life and death like no other, passing between blades and bullets as if he was *wraith-slipping*, as easily as another man might cross a room. His blades wove in and out of the spaces occupied by the living and in so doing, ended them.

This was the man he needed to kill.

Lucius saw the shadow bearing down on him an instant before it struck.

He twisted to avoid whatever was coming at him, but even he wasn't fast enough.

The impact was like being hit by a siege hammer and the air was driven from his lungs as the swooping warrior slammed him into the deck. He rolled as a black-bladed sword sliced down, and he blocked another with instinctual speed. Lucius saw a figure in black lunge at him, and rolled his wrists to bring his blades together in a blocking cross. He twisted his grip and spun on his heel to deliver a killing strike to his opponent's throat.

His blade struck razor-edged steel, and only a desperate parry kept his own head on his shoulders as a silent blade came at him. Lucius was impressed, pleased to have found a warrior who knew which end of a sword to use. Most other opponents would have lost their weapons in his first block.

'You have some skill,' he said as they circled one another.

The warrior didn't reply, and only then did Lucius notice that this was no Iron Hand.

'Raven Guard,' he said, recognising the grip, stance and angle of blades favoured by Corax's shadow warriors. 'That explains why you're still alive.'

The Raven Guard attacked in a darting series of blinding feints, high cuts and dazzlingly fast thrusts that Lucius parried, dodged and backed away from in an increasingly swift-paced duel. The warrior wasn't just skilled, he was talented too. Gifted, even.

'I haven't killed any little black birds in a while,' giggled Lucius. 'Since Isstvan, at least.'

The warrior didn’t react to Lucius’s goading, which marked him as even more skilled than he’d thought. Realising he would not easily get a rise out of the Raven Guard, Lucius put aside his need to humiliate his opponent as well as defeat him. Time and time again they came at each other, spinning like dancers locked in a routine that could only end in the death of one of the performers.

Lucius studied the warrior as they fought. His movements were like oil in the air, a slick progression of flowing poise. His bladework was flawless, technically perfect, but empowered by an innate understanding of the art form of the sword. With a start, Lucius realised that this warrior was almost the equal of him.

A jolt of uncertainty flooded Lucius at the thought that the warrior had a chance of besting him. He laughed, giddy at having finally met a worthy foe, his every nerve surging at the idea of defeat, even if the possibility were so remote as to be next to impossible. That such a possibility existed at all was reason enough to revel in it.

‘My friend,’ he said, parrying a low strike to the groin and riposting with a playful strike to the head. ‘Your name, I must know it.’

The warrior responded with a viper-swift lunge to the neck and a spinning cut to the throat. Angry now, Lucius batted away the strike and slashed at the Raven Guard’s wrist. A black blade turned the blow aside and a counter-strike of uncanny speed cut a groove in the eagle on Lucius’s plastron.

‘Answer me, damn you,’ snapped Lucius, and another stinging cut slipped past his defences to open a deep gash on his cheek. Astounded, Lucius broke the circle of the duel and lowered his weapons in astonishment. Blood dripped from his face and his anger vanished in an ecstatic burst of happiness.

‘You wounded me,’ he said, amazed and thrilled at the same time. ‘You *actually* wounded me. Do you know how rare that is?’

Before the warrior could answer – not that Lucius really expected him to – another figure burst into the circle of the duel and barrelled him to the ground. Lucius fell hard, losing his grip on his swords and striking his head on a buckled deck plate. Through a haze of blood and dizziness, he saw a blur of pink and gold throw itself at the Raven Guard swordsman.

The new arrival swung a pair of swords in a beheading cut, and even through a red veil of blood Lucius recognised the clumsy bladework of Bastarnae Abranxe. The Raven Guard ducked below the blow and spun around his attacker. His swords plunged into Abranxe’s midriff in the gap between his back plate and culet. Abranxe grunted in pain, but before he could do more than spin to face his attacker, his throat was opened by one blade, and the top of his skull by another.

Abranxe fell dead and Lucius laughed to see him so humiliated. He doubted even Fabius could undo that kind of damage.

The Raven Guard didn’t pause to enjoy his kill and sprang forwards to finish Lucius.

But the Fates, it seemed, had purpose yet for him.

A blue-hot dome of electric fire exploded in the centre of the embarkation deck, sending a booming thunderclap of displaced air through the arched chamber like the shockwave of an atmospheric munition. The Raven Guard stumbled and Lucius tasted the bitter metallic taste of teleportation energy. He blinked away the after-images of multiple light sources and phantom echoes of things that had never existed.

The fighting in the embarkation deck ceased as the blue light vanished.

In its place stood Perturabo within a circle of robotic guardians.

FIFTEEN

Another Way to Fight

Iron Within

Rally to the Captain

Thamatica ran the length of the enginarium, moving between reactor vent controls through streaming plumes of escaping gases. Hot enough to flense bare flesh, each superheated blast scorched his armour of paint and made the interior feel like a furnace. He sweated through his bodyglove, the perspiration stinging his eyes and blurring the reams of information flickering past on his visor.

Emergency vents were draining power from the reactors as quickly as they could. He paused by a venting station and watched the ivory numerals on the display click and clack as they spun down like the altimeter of an aircraft in freefall. The newly limbered servo-harness on his back worked red iron flow-wheels on the pipework higher up, and a data inload spike stabbed into an open terminal port nearby. His bloodstream surged with synaesthetic heat from the protesting reactors.

‘Still far too high,’ he said. ‘Tyro’s not going to like that. No, not one bit.’

Voices cried in his ear, demanding updates, but he ignored them. What could he tell them that would matter? The power levels in the ship’s reactors were spiralling out of control, and no matter how many null rods he deployed, they were on the verge of going critical.

‘And once that happens…’ He left the sentence hanging.

Thamatica moved on through the engine spaces, watching dying servitors whose skin bubbled and peeled in the intolerable heat as they worked. Exo-shielded enginseers fought with the venting controls, diverting power into redundant systems and looking for additional ways to bleed off the excess safely. A futile task, but one which might buy the captain some time to fight the enemy boarders. That was all Thamatica could give him, and it galled him that he had brought them to this.

‘I should be down in the decks, fighting,’ he said, diverting a portion of his attention to study the tactical feeds from the ship’s data engines. The embarkation deck was holding – just – though reports on the nature of the enemy made little sense, but it wasn’t the fighting there that concerned Thamatica.

A number of splinter groups had broken into the *Sisypheum* on the levels above the embarkation deck. Quick reaction forces were even now moving to intercept, but more and more it looked like the initial attack was intended to pin the defenders in place while some other objective was the true goal of the attack.

Thamatica shut off the feed. While he was as fearsome and indomitable in battle as any warrior of the X Legion, he knew this was where he could do the most good. He disengaged his inload spike and moved back towards the control station at the end of the engine spaces. Shapes moved in the fog of irradiated steam: servitors who would be dead within the hour from atomic poisoning and lexmechanics whose higher brain functions would already be degrading in the chemical backwash.

Here and there, a few Iron Hands worked in the guts of opened reactor casings, braving radioactive bleed-off and boiling, corrosive gases to keep a lid on the imminent reactor meltdown that would blow the *Sisypheum* to its component parts.

An explosion of such magnitude would destroy everything nearby.

Suddenly Thamatica knew how he too could fight the enemy.

The Iron Circle locked their shields together in a blunt wedge, like the prow of a Legion starship, and leaned into their charge. Gunfire ricocheted from their energy shields and heavily armoured plates. Driven by fibre-bundle muscles and power cores, their frame was thickened around the shoulders, heads and arms to better resist incoming fire, and nothing the Iron Hands could throw at the battle robots slowed their pace one iota.

An unstoppable juggernaut of burnished iron, gold and jet, they hammered the Iron Hands defence like a wrecking ball. A pair of Rhinos were smashed aside, sent skidding back fifty metres by coordinated swipes of their shields, and half a dozen Legion warriors were crushed beneath the unstoppable power of their siege hammers.

With machine precision, their shields parted and Perturabo surged from within their aegis with Forrix and Kroeger at his side. *Forgebreaker* swept out and hammered down onto the deck. Seismic shockwaves surged out in a radial pattern, flipping over armoured vehicles and sending debris flying through the

air. Iron Hands were swept aside and hurled against the walls like leaves in a hurricane. Mobile gun platforms were smashed into their component parts and the emplaced weapon turrets went offline with the pressure differential.

The Iron Circle locked their shields to the deck and swung up shoulder-mounted weapons: rotary cannons, grenade launchers and quad-carbines. Overlapping fields of fire fanned out from their position, a horizontal sheet of trace and las that burned and blasted anything in its path.

‘My lord!’ shouted Forrix, dropping to one knee and bringing his combi-bolter up.

Perturabo saw a Rhino that had somehow managed to remain upright. Straight away, he saw its mass was considerably more than a standard-pattern APC. Vox antenna told him that this was a commander’s tank. A warrior of the X Legion sat in the cupola, aiming the slaved storm bolters.

‘He’s mine,’ said Perturabo. ‘Finish the rest yourselves.’

Forrix nodded and waved three of the Iron Circle to his side, pushing round to the flanks where the Emperor’s Children had fallen upon the reeling Iron Hands. Their slaughters were unseemly, but thorough. None of the X Legion warriors would be getting up again and none would be fit for gene-harvesting. Kroeger leapt a fallen bulkhead plate, his bolt pistol banging off rounds into the stunned defenders. Another three of the Iron Circle kept pace with the newest triarch, keeping the worst of the enemy fire at bay and adding the power of their own weapons to his charge.

Two of the Iron Circle took position ahead of Perturabo as a blitz of bolter shells blazed from the Rhino commander’s guns. The shields of the Iron Circle intercepted them in a storm of sparks and detonations. The battle robots skidded around and lowered their shields like a ramp before him, and Perturabo used them as a springboard to vault into the air with his hammer raised high. An arcing stream of rounds followed him up, detonating on his armour without effect. *Forgebreaker* arced down like an unstoppable piston and flattened the front half of the armoured vehicle entirely. The tank flipped up and somersaulted overhead.

Perturabo turned to watch the Rhino be slammed down with bone-crushing force by the integrity field. It rolled into a projecting stanchion, buckling what remained of its armour like foil.

More gunshots reached out to him, blasts of coldly accurate bolter fire and the spiralling contrail of a missile. An energy shield deflected the missile up into the roof space and another took the battering impact of the mass-reactive shells. He

dropped his hammer to his side and swung his arm around, unleashing a thundering salvo from his gauntlet. Heavy, custom-fabricated rounds – fashioned by a machine of the Firenzii polymath – punched through Legion plate with plasmic armour-piercing warheads and used their victims' body mass as bio-thermic fuel.

Warriors ignited like human pyres with every detonation, and Perturabo walked his fire through the Iron Hands as they rallied on their sergeants and officers. Each time Perturabo saw a ranked warrior establish control, he slew him with a lethally accurate round that punched through his centre mass and set him ablaze.

A desperate group of Iron Hands charged from the wreckage of a blazing vehicle, a kill team with meltaguns, plasma rifles and grenade belts. The carapace guns of the Iron Circle cut a handful down, who vanished in the blue fire of premature detonations. Perturabo stilled the violence of the battle robots with a thought and let the enemy come.

Fifteen hard, hungry warriors. Elites by the look of them.

He saw hate in the light of their helms, theirs and his own reflected.

Their armour was beaten and scarred. Their willingness to die was admirable.

His hammer took the first three, breaking them apart like porcelain dolls. A burst of gunfire ripped another two in half. Then they were upon him, swords cutting and high-energy pistols flashing with sun-hot brightness. The Iron Hands were a Legion of killers, men born into clashing tribes and violence; part of a warrior culture shaped by the ruined world upon which they grew to manhood.

They fought well, some even managing to land blows upon Perturabo's armour. A plasma blast scored across his breastplate. He snapped the weapon in two and crumpled the wielder's head with the broken barrel. A shriek of flash-burned air scorched his shoulder plate black before *Forgebreaker* turned the warrior to a mist of exploded body parts. His gauntlet spat death, each shot punching through its target like a fiery lance. Wherever he gestured, flames and screams followed.

The Iron Hands could not defeat him, could not even fight him, but they never faltered and did not let the absolute impossibility of the task distract them from its execution. Perturabo admired them for such single-minded devotion even as he killed them without mercy.

The last warrior dropped, his upper half a pulped mess while his lower half twitched at Perturabo's feet. Even without looking up, it was abundantly clear that the battle for the embarkation deck was over. Forrix and Kroeger hounded

the Iron Hands as the sounds of gunfire slackened. The last of the defenders were either dead or had fallen back behind metres-thick blast shutters that would take breaching charges to penetrate. The crew would be manning pre-prepared choke points throughout the ship, bottlenecks and killing grounds where their lack of numbers would not be a disadvantage.

The Emperor's Children cavorted without honour among the fallen, looting the corpses and making sport of their burned and violated flesh. Valuable time was being wasted, and time was of the essence in any boarding action. The success or failure of such an assault depended on preventing the enemy from regrouping or rallying behind surviving commanders. Keeping the initiative in any fight was key to victory, and never more so than during the desperate struggle to wrest a starship from its crew.

Yet Perturabo hesitated to push the attack.

He took a moment to study the troops by which this victory had been won, a monstrous host of unnatural forms and nightmarish appearances.

A few dozen of the living creatures wandered as though lost, while the corpses of the dead lay strewn around the deck. Perturabo knew them for what they were: the terata wrought from the harvested gene-seed of Isstvan's dead by Fulgrim's flesh-alchemist. Perturabo's heart hardened as he saw squad markings and Legion tattoos that surgery or cellular manipulation had not obscured. Those of the Iron Hands were in the majority, but there were Salamanders and Raven Guard aplenty too.

It sat ill with Perturabo that his brother's Legion chose to violate the genetic structure of the Space Marines, even enemy ones, for once such a technology was unleashed, it would be impossible to contain. What other boundaries might such a man flout if given free rein with the Emperor's genetic knowledge?

Nor had these disgusting abominations been drawn only from the Legions still loyal to the Emperor. Here and there, Perturabo saw markings belonging to the Legions of Angron, Mortarion, Alpharius, Lorgar and even one of the Sons of Horus. He had known Fabius had plundered the dead of their enemies, but to know that no treachery was beyond him was a sobering thought.

If Fulgrim cared so little for the warriors of his brothers in rebellion, to what deeper betrayals might he yet sink?

Escorted by a capering, gibbering honour guard of drooling terata and Marius Vairosean's Kakophoni, Fabius made his way through the corridors of the *Sisypheum* with single-minded haste. A maintenance postern left unsealed for a

moment too long had granted them access to the guts of the ship and the mutant strength of his terata had broken them into its working heart.

The four creatures with him were the very best of his work, ones whose genetic structure had required the smallest amount of surgical modification. Superficially they still resembled Space Marines, albeit hideously bloated and overgrown, with whatever loose plates of armour he had been able to scavenge strapped to their bodies.

Yes, these were his greatest creations, but even these terata were consuming themselves.

Biological furnaces raged within them, voraciously devouring nutrient matter to sustain the physiological changes wrought upon their flesh. The chemical gruel they were fed should have been enough to keep them from immolating under the demands of their flesh, but too many had collapsed and died under the stresses of combat – enough to convince Fabius that something was very wrong with his underlying gene-coding.

Was it possible the data Alpharius had stolen from the Raven Guard had been flawed?

Unlikely, for none among the Alpha Legion had the necessary expertise to insert such a corrupting agent without his being able to detect it. No, the flaw was one of his own making, and the thrill of rooting it out was as potent as the frustration of its occurrence.

The sounds of battle echoed strangely through the corridors. They grew and receded as the defenders fought tooth and nail to hold onto their ship, not knowing it was already lost.

‘Where are we going?’ demanded Vairosean, his voice mangled by his raw screeching and distended jaws. The former captain of the Third Company was one of Fabius’s more successful surgeries, the bone structure of his skull augmented and reshaped to better allow his selected mutations to function. His unexpected pairing with the experimental instruments designed by Bequa Kynska had proved to be wholly beneficial.

‘The apothecarion,’ said Fabius.

‘Why?’ gurgled Vairosean.

‘Because there is something there I desire.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Fabius, irritated at being questioned.

‘You don’t know?’ growled Vairosean, and his axe-like weapon matched his ire.

Vairosean was still considered to be a captain of the Legion, and commanded respect. The way the Legion was fracturing, that wouldn't last much longer, but while it did, even Fabius was bound by the chains of command.

'There is a power source there, an ancient machine whose function resonates in frequencies I have never encountered. I do not know what it is, so I want it. You will help me get it.'

Vairosean grunted something unintelligible in reply and the three Kakophoni at his back loosed a grating bark of squalling noise. The low static burr of their weapons set Fabius's teeth on edge, and their constant howling was only contained by the razor gags they wore. Those could be disengaged with a command from Vairosean, and the screaming killers would shred the faces of anything in their path with their sonic thunder.

Fabius put the Kakophoni from his mind as they penetrated deeper into the enemy ship via a circuitous route. They had not reached this far without cost, but the fury of his terata and the shockwave power of Vairosean's warriors had swept aside the pockets of resistance they had encountered along the way.

The bare ironwork of the Iron Hands ship was drab and gloomy, quite without the splendour of the *Andronicus*. Though Fabius eschewed the gaudy theatrical vigour of his brother warriors, his labyrinthine domain was drenched in sensation of an altogether different kind. It was hard to remember a time when the fleets of the 28th Expedition had looked like this. A lifetime or more ago, thought Fabius.

One of the terata looked down at him, its mashed and spread features like that of a bloated gigantism sufferer. Its eyes were red with haemorrhaging and bulging with chemical reactions. Saliva drooled from between its swollen jaws and its breath was hot and animal.

'What funny?' it asked.

'Nothing,' said Fabius. 'Don't speak to me again.'

'They speak?' said Vairosean. 'I hadn't thought any of them retained the intellect.'

'Some do,' said Fabius, unwilling to admit that the loss of intellect was one of many problems to be rectified in the next batch.

Vairosean said, 'You're a long way from the next level of post-human evolution, Apothecary. These are a backward step to humanity's primate history.'

'I can't produce the next great leap forwards in evolution without cost,' said Fabius, his finger tightening on the haft of his medicae needle gun. 'Every living thing is linked and part of a great chain that stretches back and forwards in time.

Millennia from now there will be life-forms that look at us with a kind of horror that we were so unevolved.'

'Speak for yourself, Apothecary,' grunted Vairosean.

Fabius wanted to kill Vairosean, success or not, but before he could act on that sudden impulse, the terata's heavy head snapped up and its enlarged nostrils twitched as it sifted a cocktail of scents.

Fabius caught them a second later: lapping powder, gun oil and expended munitions, and the cold, caustic stink of an apothecarion.

A rabble of Iron Hands appeared at the end of the corridor, weapons drawn. Fabius wasn't worried; he'd known they wouldn't make it all the way without running into some opposition.

'Kill them,' he said.

And the terata sprang to obey him.

'Thamatica!' shouted Cadmus Tyro. 'For Medusa's sake, answer me!'

He threw down the vox-horn and made fists on the edge of the command lectern. The few systems available to him all told the same dispiriting story of defeat and failure. The embarkation deck was lost and the enemy would be through the blast doors in a matter of minutes. And once that happened, the ship was lost.

Tyro refused to accept that.

'Wayland,' he said. 'Tell me you have some power.'

'A little,' said Sabik Wayland, moving between the various bridge stations as reports flooded into each of them. 'I've diverted most of that to the weapons.'

Tyro nodded; he'd felt the vibrations through the *Sisypheum*'s super-structure.

'We're hurting them?'

'Some, but not enough.'

'So why are they not firing on us?'

'I don't know for sure, Cadmus,' said Wayland. 'Maybe because there is a primarch aboard. Whatever the reason, be thankful for that small mercy.'

Tyro knew he should be thankful that the *Andronicus* wasn't shooting at them, but it felt like an insult that they were being boarded, a spiteful knife in the guts that smacked of arrogance and a disregard for the abilities of those aboard.

'Any word from Cybus?'

'No,' said Wayland. 'Not since Perturabo teleported onto the embarkation deck.'

Tyro felt his flesh crawl at the idea of being boarded by so terrible a foe. In

any war scenario, having one of the Emperor's demigod sons take to the field immediately shortened the odds, and he was finding how bitter it tasted to be on the opposite side.

'Then he's dead,' said Tyro.

'Is the ship lost?' asked Varuchi Vohra. 'Will the enemy take us alive?'

Tyro looked into Vohra's face. Though his words were spoken calmly, Tyro saw naked terror lurking behind the guide's eyes. He feared being taken by the enemy, which was entirely reasonable, but he saw something else, a fear that had nothing to do with whatever fate the Emperor's Children or Iron Warriors might have in store for him.

Garuda flapped down from the rafters and landed on the engine control station. The bird let out a warbling caw, and danced its claws over the metal edging. A chatter of binary jabbed at the base of his neck like an insistent tapping, and he bent over the console to see what had attracted the bird's notice.

A cascade of information scrolled across the slate, the specific substance of which was beyond Tyro's expertise. He understood the gist of it, however, and his anger at Thamatica's dabbling soared to new heights.

'Wayland!' he called. 'Is Thamatica up to what I think he's up to?'

The Iron Father scanned the data, his cognitive augmetics parsing the data into manageable chunks of digestible information. From the look on his face, it was clear that Thamatica was doing *exactly* what Tyro thought he was doing.

'He's not venting the excess energy any more,' said Wayland. 'He's drawing it all into the engine core. They'll go critical in under four minutes.'

'Can you stop him?'

'Not from here, captain,' said Wayland.

'Then get down there,' ordered Tyro. 'Get down there and stop him.'

He saw the hesitation in Wayland's eyes and said, 'Did you hear me?'

'I heard you, captain,' said Wayland.

'Then why aren't you en route to the enginarium?'

'Because I think this might be the only option left to us.'

'Destroying the ship?' snapped Tyro. 'Never. While we still have breath and bolters, we'll fight these bastards to the end. Ulrach Branthan entrusted the command of his ship to me and the Land of Shadows will be noonday bright before I let Thamatica blow it up.'

Wayland rushed over to the captain's station.

'I know, captain,' said Wayland. 'But think about it. An enemy primarch is aboard, and nothing short of another primarch is going to be enough to drive him

off. If Thamatica is doing what we think he's doing then we can kill Perturabo. Right here and now. It won't matter how tough a primarch is, he won't survive this. We can avenge Ferrus Manus.'

The armoured door of the apothecarion blew in with a dull clang. Escaping gases vented explosively through the torn hatch, followed closely by a shrieking blast of noise. Glass shattered and medicinal fluids spilled out; a stink of chemicals mixed with counterseptic. Clashing soundwaves zipped through the chamber like miniature comets, crazing steel and shattering anything crystalline.

Cracks spread over the surface of Ulrach Branthan's casket as Ignatius Numen and Septus Thoic returned fire, filling the empty space with shots. The sound was deafening in the enclosed space. Booming echoes and spiralling contrails pierced the gunsmoke.

Atesh Tarsa knelt beside Ulrach Branthan's casket and sighted down the length of his sniper rifle. The scope was slaved to his narthecium gauntlet and projected a wireframe rendition of his target onto his visor, with their internal organs highlighted in red. It made for kill shots every time, but ensured his battles were fought in a neon chrome shimmer of bio-thermal imagery. Right now the blown hatch was lousy with flaring heat, bolter trails and scattered, impossible readings.

A roaring form ploughed through the haze, a thunderous giant bleeding heat and biometrics that defied easy understanding. Enormous and powerful, its organs were like miniature suns within its frame, spreading energising light all through a body of monstrous proportions. Tarsa snap-fired, and the thing's organs immediately went supernova as his custom-designed bio-ammo sent it into toxic shock. Distilled from the venom of the sulvaek lizards of the Wa'kulla ash swamps, Tarsa's concoction was lethal to even the most robust cardiovascular system.

The creature kept coming.

Another round into its chest slowed it, but didn't stop it. Two headshots from Ignatius Numen finally put it on its back, but by then more were pressing through the hatch.

'Rally to the captain!' shouted Numen, moving position as a third impossible beast pushed into the apothecarion. Septus Thoic rolled from behind cover and fired a short burst into the chest of the lumbering creature. It turned and backhanded him across the chamber.

'This is Tarsa!' he yelled into the vox. 'We need help in the apothecarion.

Now!’

He disengaged the narthecium link and his vision snapped back into focus.

Immediately he saw the beast was a Space Marine, one mutated far beyond its base genome. Tarsa was an Apothecary, one of the Legion’s guardians of its genetic heritage, and to see such a gross insult to the great work of the Emperor was an affront like no other. Even the Warmaster’s betrayal shrank in comparison to this treachery. Horus’s rebellion was an insult to an ideal and had its roots in mortal disaffection, however hard that was to comprehend, but this was an insult to life itself.

He fired at the beast Thoic had injured. The shot punched into its skull like a trepanning auger and the toxin devoured its brain in seconds. It dropped with its club-like paws clutched to its head as its higher functions were necrotised.

Yet another monstrous Space Marine pushed into the apothecarion and Numen put a burst of fire into its chest before it was upon him. Tarsa went to swing his rifle round, but stopped as he saw three warriors in garishly decorated battle-plate appear in the wrecked doorway. His senses recoiled from the shrieking noise surrounding them, a din of clashing disharmony and a riot of screams issuing from shoulder-mounted augmitters. He recognised the Emperor’s Children from their hideous appearance on Isstvan V and wasted no time in putting a round through the throat of the first warrior as he unlimbered a long wire-coiled stave connected to an amplification device on his back.

The warrior dropped to his knees, a gurgling howl of pleasure torn from his opened throat as the stave flared with a burst of blue fire and a booming bass note that hurled Tarsa against Branthan’s stasis casket. He crashed down on the other side, rolling to his feet and moving away from the fallen captain.

The gurgling warrior slumped forwards as another turned a low-slung weapon around, its neck slender and flanged with whipping steel strings and a vicious barb at its end. The legionary pounded the flared base of the weapon before Tarsa could wonder at its exact function, and the air between them buckled with pure concussive force. Once again Tarsa was hurled back and his armour cracked open under the sonic pressure.

He fell to the tiled floor, his visor a static blur of overloaded systems, his rifle shattered into fragments by the blast.

Bolter fire and a roar of hatred sounded among the bellowing screams and shrieks of the Emperor’s Children’s bizarre weaponry. A head bounced from the walls and rolled towards him, a pink helmet with all manner of auditory pickups worked into the metal. Blood drooled from the ragged edges of the neck, and

Tarsa pushed himself to his feet in time to see Ignatius Numen bury his chainsword in the guts of another legionary. The Morlock's breastplate was cratered in the centre, as though from a tremendous impact, and his battle helm was missing.

Septus Thoic wrestled with one of the gene-spliced Space Marines, but his strength was no match for the boosted physique of the monster. Tarsa climbed onto the end of Branthan's casket and leapt onto its back, driving the functional end of his reductor into the back of its skull. Drills, blades and organ scoops normally used to remove progenoid glands chewed a fist-sized chunk from its head. Gurgling brain matter and blood filled the tissue compartments of Tarsa's gauntlet, and the creature let out an anguished howl before its nervous system finally processed that it was dead.

Tarsa dropped from its back as it fell, and – too late – felt a presence dart in close to him. Something long, sharp and slender punched into his flesh through the cracks in his armour, and he let out a cry of agony as a poisonous chemical sent shrieking bolts of pain along every receptor in his body. He fell like a broken automaton, his limbs jerking and his internal organs pulsing as their functions went into overdrive.

Tarsa's vision blurred with induced pain, but he saw Septus Thoic brought down by a series of clubbing blows from the last of the mutated Space Marines. The creature stamped down on Thoic's form, but Tarsa couldn't see whether the Morlock was still alive. Another blast of concussive sonics filled the apothecarion and Ignatius Numen collapsed, clutching his skull as though it were about to burst.

Tarsa tried to crawl towards Ulrach Branthan's casket, but his nerves were jangling as if an ogryn were hammering the synapses of his brain. Nothing was his to control any more, and he wanted to scream in anger, but even that catharsis was denied him.

A figure loomed over him and turned him onto his back, propping him up against the edge of the stasis casket. Tall and swathed in a long robe of a grotesquely fleshy texture, the figure's long white hair, sunken cheeks and parchment-yellow skin marked him as a practitioner of the deathly arts, one who in ages past would have been called a necromancer. And yet he still bore the sigils of the Apothecary on his pauldrons, a faded prime helix still visible beneath fresh daubs of mindless vandalism. A squatting machine-like presence clung to the Apothecary's back, a loathsome mechanised parasite with blackened limbs of blades and hypos. Its waving parts appeared to be studying him.

Tarsa wanted to spit in the traitor's face, but even as he felt a measure of control in his facial muscles, he knew he would never regain mastery of his body in time to thwart this Apothecary's plans. His head lolled to one side, and he saw Ignatius Numen spasming uncontrollably, his weapons fallen to the floor as he sought to stem the tide of blood streaming from his ears.

Two Emperor's Children stood, splay-legged, before him, cradling their howling, squalling instrument-weapons in their spiked gauntlets. One stood a head taller than the other, his armour bedecked in obscene sigils, hooks and vibrational pickups. His face was a viciously stretched and swollen nightmare of mutant bone growth and bionic implantation, making it look as though he were permanently screaming.

Tarsa fought for some defiance, but whatever toxin or nerve agent had been used against him was too potent to overcome. The Apothecary saw the hate in his eyes and grinned, exposing yellowed teeth and exhaling a corpse's death rattle.

'Don't die yet, little Salamander,' said Apothecary Fabius. 'I might yet have need of you.'

SIXTEEN

A Matter of Trust

Unconventional Entrance

Sisypheum Unleashed

Cadmus watched the readout on his command lectern, swallowing as the power levels in the engine core continued to rise. In a matter of moments the reactors were going to explode and destroy the *Sisypheum*, and though every fibre of his being rebelled against such a course of action, he knew Wayland was right.

If by their deaths they could kill a traitor primarch then they would have achieved something worthwhile after all.

He knew he should say something to the crew, final words to express the honour he felt at having served with them, but the words wouldn't come. Branthan would have given a valediction that would have survived his sacrifice, words that would live on beyond his death and be quoted by men and women facing their own demise.

Tyro had nothing, and never had he felt more like an inadequate replacement for Captain Ulrach Branthan.

He looked over at Sabik Wayland, but the Iron Father would not meet his gaze, too fixed on the readings streaming into the engineering station. Garuda flapped its metal wings in the upper reaches of the bridge, cawing and swooping down around the eldar guide. If Varuchi Vohra was irritated by the bird's attentions, he gave no sign.

'How long?' asked Tyro.

Wayland looked up. 'I'd estimate around three and a half minutes.'

Tyro cleared his throat. 'We did some good out here, Sabik,' he said.

Wayland nodded. 'Aye, captain,' he said. 'That we did. Ferrus would be proud of us.'

'I'll settle for not being a disgrace,' said Tyro.

Wayland looked confused by that, but his response was broken off when the

vox-station crackled with an incoming transmission. A blare of emergency horns and whooping brays of superheated steam filled the bridge, but through it all cut a voice that was part desperation, part gleeful anarchy.

‘Cadmus? Cadmus, are you there?’ called Frater Thamatica.

‘Frater? Is that you?’

‘Yes, of course it is,’ answered Thamatica. ‘Who else would it be?’

‘Damn you, Thamatica, you’ve killed us all,’ spat Tyro.

‘Not yet, boy, but keep interrupting me and *you* might.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Is Frater Wayland still on the bridge?’ asked Thamatica over the crashing bangs and screeching sirens from the engineering spaces.

Wayland rushed over to the vox-station and grabbed the speaker horn.

‘I’m here, Frater,’ he said. ‘You’re drawing all the excess energy into the engines.’

‘I am,’ agreed Thamatica.

‘They’ll go critical in under three minutes.’

‘I think you’ll find it’s slightly *over* three minutes, Frater,’ said Thamatica. ‘You can’t beat in situ data recording. But accuracy aside, you need to get Cadmus to transfer command authority to the data engine down here. I need the ship.’

‘Not a chance,’ snapped Tyro. ‘I’m not giving you the ship’s last command.’

‘You have to,’ barked Thamatica, all levity gone from his voice. ‘And do it quickly, captain, or we are all dead.’

‘Dead? We’re already dead, Thamatica,’ said Tyro. ‘You’ve seen to that. You’re going to blow up the ship.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Thamatica. ‘I’d never blow up this grand old ship. Well, not deliberately anyway. Now you listen to me, Cadmus Tyro. I’ve been pushing starships to the edge of their tolerances and beyond since before you got your fist lopped off. Now transfer command to my data engine, and I swear by the Seven Sacred Shadows of Karaashi that we will live through this. And if we don’t, well, it won’t matter anyway.’

Tyro looked up at Wayland, who shrugged with incomprehension.

‘What are you planning?’ asked Wayland.

Thamatica’s amusement was audible even over the noise below decks.

‘You’ll see, Sabik,’ he said. ‘But best get that guide ready at the helm. Oh, and one last thing.’

‘What?’

‘Hold onto something.’

The breaching charges were in place and ready to break open the guts of the Iron Hands ship. Every legionary of the Iron Warriors was a demolitions expert, and Kroeger was no exception. Within minutes of the embarkation deck’s clearance, he had rigged charges capable of tearing through the heavy armour of the blast doors. Kroeger checked the ring of explosives around the main shutter one last time and jogged back towards Perturabo.

The primarch had said nothing since the last of the Iron Hands had been killed, walking among the dead as though seeking something lost. Forrix was at his side, the wily old First Captain having delegated the placement of his demolition charges.

‘We’re ready to breach,’ said Kroeger, arriving at Perturabo and Forrix’s side.

The Iron Circle formed a wide ring around the primarch, their number smaller by two. That the Iron Hands had managed to destroy any of the battle robots had surprised Kroeger, but he should have known the X Legion was never one to lie down and take a beating. Once again, Kroeger had been honoured to watch his primarch in battle, and standing in the ruin of another crushing victory, Kroeger had never been prouder to serve the IV Legion.

Perturabo surveyed the aftermath of the fighting: the dead bodies, the wrecked vehicles and the torn-up remains of flesh. Backlit by the flames of a gutted Rhino, he stood taller than Kroeger remembered. His cloak lifted and flapped in the thermals of the fires and the black and gold gemstone in the skull brooch caught the firelight.

Perturabo nodded and dropped to one knee with his hand pressed to the deck.

‘Not yet, triarch,’ said Perturabo. ‘I need a moment.’

Kroeger looked over at Forrix.

‘They’ll be regrouping at choke points deeper in the ship,’ he said, knowing that Perturabo and Forrix must surely be aware of this.

‘They are indeed,’ said Perturabo. ‘And we will root them out and destroy them. It will be difficult and we will lose many warriors along the way.’

‘We lose more the longer we wait,’ said Kroeger.

‘I know that.’

‘Then I don’t understand why you’re hesitating, my lord.’

‘You mistake consideration for hesitation, Kroeger. I am giving our worthy enemies a last stand,’ said Perturabo, rising and indicating the hideously mutated flesh of the monsters Fabius had brought aboard. ‘This was not an honourable

victory, so we owe the Iron Hands an honourable death.’

‘That makes no sense,’ raged Kroeger. ‘We need to push on quickly, kill them all before they can turn this ship into more of a death trap than it already is.’

Perturabo drew *Forgebreaker* and swung it round, letting the killing face come to rest on Kroeger’s breastplate.

‘Careful, my young triarch,’ said Perturabo, his voice devoid of tone. ‘I need a plain speaker in the Trident, not a yapping dog. Be silent.’

Kroeger looked to Forrix for support, but the First Captain had the fingers of his right hand pressed to the side of his helm. His head nodded at whatever he was hearing over the vox and he looked up. His alarm was obvious.

‘My lord,’ said Forrix urgently. ‘We need to get you off this ship.’

Perturabo lowered his hammer and turned to the First Captain. ‘Explain.’

‘Barban Falk reports a massive build-up of power in the ship’s engine reactors,’ said Forrix. ‘They’re almost overloaded; minutes at best from blowing this ship to radioactive debris.’

Perturabo shook his head. ‘It’s a bluff,’ he said. ‘If the Iron Hands are dying here, they’re going to do it fighting.’

‘You can’t be sure of that,’ said Forrix.

‘I knew my brother,’ said Perturabo. ‘And his Legion would not end their own lives like this. Not when there are enemies left to fight.’

‘Ferrus Manus is dead, my lord,’ said Forrix. ‘Who can say what his Legion of flesh-haters are capable of now that he’s gone?’

‘Not this,’ said Perturabo, adamant.

‘No,’ said Kroeger with sudden certainty, confident of what he would do were the roles reversed. ‘You’re wrong, my lord. They’ll gladly blow this ship apart if they think they’re going to kill you in the process. What do the lives of a few hundred legionaries matter against the killing of a primarch? One ship of warriors measured against the life of the Lord of Iron? It’s no question at all. I’m just surprised it’s taken them this long to realise it.’

Perturabo didn’t reply, considering the words of his triarchs.

With every second that passed, Kroeger expected to feel the white-hot instant of detonation as the ship’s reactor core exploded.

‘My lord,’ pressed Kroeger. ‘You wanted a plain speaker, well this is as plain as I can say it. You need to get off this ship right now. They’ll end their lives in a nuclear fireball if they think you’ll die too. But if it’s just us, then they’ll fight. We can take this ship, you know we can, but we can’t do it with you aboard. You need to go and leave the killing to us.’

Kroeger tensed as Perturabo's cold eyes fixed on him. Berossus had been broken by *Forgebreaker* for less. At last the primarch nodded and drew the hammer across his shoulders.

'No,' he said. 'We all go. As you say, this ship is a death trap by now, and I'll lose no more warriors to Fulgrim's vanity. We will return to the *Iron Blood* and blow this ship apart with our guns. And if the *Andronicus* gets in our way then we'll gut it too.'

Kroeger grinned. *This* was the Iron Warriors way of war.

Absolute and unrelenting, remorseless and unforgiving.

'We can't give the Iron Hands an honourable death,' said Perturabo, 'but I'll take payment for their deaths from Fulgrim.'

Forrix nodded and said, 'Falk, teleport homers engaged. Get us out of here.'

Atesh Tarsa struggled against the chemical poison keeping his limbs immobile, but it was like struggling against an implacable tide of webgun solution. The traitor Apothecary regarded him curiously, as though they were old friends who had recently been reconciled after a period of estrangement.

'The device on the dead warrior's chest,' he said, his voice the hiss of parched dust in the desert. 'It is old technology from the times before, is it not?'

Tarsa shook his head. 'It is of no use to you. It is keyed to Captain Branthan's genome.'

Fabius grinned and wagged a scolding finger before his face.

'You Salamanders make such terrible liars,' said Fabius, running a cracked and grimy fingernail along the line of Tarsa's jawline, over his cheek to his eyes. 'I blame Vulkan.'

'Don't you dare say his name,' spat Tarsa.

'Why not? Is there some tradition of Nocturne not to speak ill of the dead?'

'Vulkan lives,' said Tarsa, repeating the words like a mantra. 'Vulkan lives. Vulkan lives!'

Fabius laughed. 'Such conviction for one so ignorant of the truth.'

Tarsa gritted his teeth as he felt a painful, awakening sensation in his extremities. His fingertips twitched.

'Kill him, Fabius,' said the howl-faced warrior. 'Take what you want and let us leave.'

'In time,' said Fabius, and Tarsa's nerve endings danced painfully within his flesh. He was able to control the involuntary motions with an effort of will. He pulled his fingers into a fist.

The arachnid machine on the traitor Apothecary's back hauled Tarsa to his feet, propping him up against the stasis casket. Fabius stared through the glass with a ferocious desire, his hooded eyes alight at the prospect of plundering the Heart of Iron from Branthan's body.

'The things I will do with this device…' he said hungrily.

'You'll kill him,' managed Tarsa through gritted teeth.

'And you think I–'

Tarsa swung his arm in a perfect right cross and smashed his fist into Fabius's face. Teeth broke and blood sprayed from the traitor Apothecary's jaw as he reeled from the blow. The mechanised arachnid released Tarsa and he slumped to his haunches. He tried to push himself to his feet, but the blow had taken everything he had.

Fabius stood above him, the lower half of his face a mask of red, his black eyes furious.

'You will suffer for that,' he said. 'You will beg for death over the years I can keep you alive to endure my tortures.'

Tarsa looked up and the ghost of a smile touched his lips.

'Why do you smile?' demanded Fabius.

'Brother Sharrowkyn,' said Tarsa. 'Is there something wrong with the floor?'

Fabius turned to see the Raven Guard drop from the tangle of cables and pipework on the ceiling. Two black-bladed swords plunged into Fabius's chest, and oily black gore squirted from the wounds. The Apothecary fell back, his rictus features twisted in open-mouthed horror. Sharrowkyn wrenched the swords out and pivoted on his heel to hurl one of his blades. It spun in the air and punched through the helm of one of the Emperor's Children, who dropped with a strangled shriek of dissonant sound that echoed painfully in Tarsa's skull.

Before Sharrowkyn could finish Fabius, the last of the monsters threw itself at him. The Raven Guard flipped up and over Ulrach Branthan's casket, landing by the far wall with his slender-bladed gladius held high at his right shoulder. The creature smashed into the wall of the apothecarion, its body swelling before his eyes and crimson veins standing out on its muscles like hydraulic feeds on the verge of rupturing from the pressure. Whatever biological processes were at work within the beast, they were driving it into paroxysms of rage and strength. Blackened claws erupted from its fused hands and rippling bone spikes exploded along the length of its spine as hissing drool spilled from its elongating, crocodilian jaw.

'Right now would be good, brother,' said Sharrowkyn, though Tarsa had no

idea to whom he was talking.

The gene-maddened beast charged at the Raven Guard with a bellow of hatred.

Sharrowkyn threw himself to the side.

And the wall of the apothecarion exploded outwards in a cascade of sparking metal, snapped cabling, ribbed supports and coffered panels. A towering construction of bare steel and black-streaked warplate smashed through with powerful mechanised strides and pounding arms. A rotating fist of crackling energy and hyper-dense fibre-bundle muscles took hold of the brutish Space Marine mutant and slammed its head against the wall.

Incredibly, the beast's skull remained intact. It reeled from the blow and attempted to focus on the thing that had somehow managed to hurt it.

Brother Bombastus, the Iron Thunder of Medusa, shrugged himself clear of debris and cable runs from the interior of the wall spaces. Too large to enter the apothecarion by any conventional means, Bombastus had made an unconventional entrance.

Still bloating with rampant self-consumption, the mutant reared up on legs that cracked and swelled as they realigned themselves to some new and unfathomable genetic instruction. Its elongating arms slammed into Bombastus, its slavering jaw crunching down on his skull-stamped sarcophagus. Acid-drooling fangs tore deep gouges in his bare metal plates, and diamond-hard claws tore into his armour like plasma cutters on a Techmarine's servo-harness.

Bombastus took hold of the creature's thickening neck and smashed the upper arc of his iron casket into its face. Bones shattered and fangs snapped as the entire front half of the creature's skull became instantly concave. Just for good measure, the storm bolter slung beneath Bombastus's fist roared. A mushrooming fountain of blood and brain matter sprayed the ceiling as the explosive shells detonated within the monster's brain cavity.

The creature flopped like a rag doll in the Dreadnought's grip, and its shredded remains were dropped to the floor with a harsh grate of distaste.

'Apothecary Tarsa,' boomed Bombastus. 'You called for help.'

Tarsa almost laughed in relief as Sharrowkyn attended to him. His body still felt weak, but at least he had command of it again.

'That I did, Brother Bombastus,' he said, struggling to his feet and enclosing one fist in the palm of his hand. 'Your assistance is most welcome.'

Tarsa looked around for the Emperor's Children who had come so close to killing him and disrupting Captain Branthan's stasis casket. They had fled at the sight of Bombastus, and Tarsa couldn't say he blamed them.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Sharrowkyn.

‘I am fine, or at least I will be soon enough,’ said Tarsa.

Sharrowkyn nodded and moved off to check on the two fallen Morlocks. Tarsa took a moment to collect himself as Bombastus leaned over to look down into Ulrach Branthan’s casket. The captain’s immobile face stared up, unmoving and frozen in mid-sentence.

‘I offered to give him this body of iron and steel,’ said Bombastus.

‘And he refused,’ said Tarsa. ‘He would not take what is not his.’

‘It is not right that I exist and he does not.’

Tarsa gestured to the rapidly decomposing corpse of the last mutant beast. ‘Right now, I am very glad that it is you that walks among us, Brother Bombastus.’

‘You are Salamander,’ said Bombastus. ‘You do not understand. Flesh is inherently flawed, and his will not long endure this drawn-out death. I have lived long enough in this iron shell, and it would better for a Captain of Battle to be abroad than a simple warrior.’

‘You are wrong,’ said Tarsa.

‘You presume too much familiarity,’ said Bombastus. ‘You do not know me, and I would die a thousand times over if it gave my captain life again.’

Tarsa had no answer for the Dreadnought, and left him to his melancholy. He helped Sharrowkyn lift Septus Thoic onto a listing examination gurney. The Morlock’s armour was torn and bent out of shape, but he had survived the beating he’d taken. Both his arms were bent at angles that suggested multiple dislocations.

Ignatius Numen pulled himself to his feet, wearing a dazed expression that told Tarsa he was clearly concussed from the sonic barrage that had felled him.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked as Numen retrieved his weapons.

Numen did not respond, and Tarsa reached out to place a hand on the Morlock’s arm.

‘Brother Numen?’

‘Are you speaking?’ asked Numen, his words coming too loud.

‘Yes,’ said Tarsa. ‘Can you hear me?’

‘What?’

‘I said, can you hear me?’

Numen shook his head. ‘I can’t hear you. You’ll have to shout.’

Tarsa looked at the dried blood and tissue on Numen’s cheeks and knew that whatever rudimentary hearing had been left to him after the plasma blast on

Isstvan was now gone.

The Morlock was completely deaf.

Wayland watched the power levels rising in the engine cores and felt the iron fingers of his left gauntlet twitching. He wasn't afraid, as such; it had long been his secret belief that they would all die out here in the northern marches, unremembered and alone, at best a footnote in the future histories of this war. What concerned him was the fact that they might be about to die by the reckless actions of an Iron Father many had considered unfit for the position, a dangerous rogue element in the Legion machinery.

Thamatica was brilliant, no question of that, but the nature of his brilliance was that he learned more from his failures than he did from his successes.

Wayland hoped the *Sisypheum* wouldn't be the last of Thamatica's failures.

Blazing circuits of light flared around Forrix as the last of the teleportation energies dissipated into the damping coils encircling the chamber. Superconducting conduits bled the power required for teleportation into the energy soakaways, and a klaxon brayed in time with the pulsing bleed-off. Moments later, the teleport disc, a skull-etched podium of electrically-scoured iron plates, was thronged with armoured figures. Forrix felt the nauseous, stomach-punch dislocation of teleport and clamped down on the familiar sickness.

'You don't like teleporting, do you?' said Kroeger.

Forrix shook his head. 'No. Being broken up like that, it's like dying each time.'

Kroeger nodded as though he understood, and they stepped down from the podium as the warriors of the Iron Circle buzzed and clicked inside their armoured chassis. Their onboard systems would take a moment to realign after the translation. Perturabo strode from the disc and made his way from the chamber through an irising doorway as the energy coils dropped into the floor.

Kroeger and Forrix followed the Lord of Iron, feeling imminent violence in his silence as they made their way back to the bridge. Falk was at the command station, a hololith floating in the air before him that displayed readings from the Iron Hands ship and its unmistakable reactor overload.

'How long?' asked Perturabo.

'Less than a minute,' said Falk.

Beyond the shimmering graphic, the main viewscreen showed the snub-nosed

bullet of the enemy ship as it wallowed in space like the carcass of a brain-dead void whale.

‘Their manoeuvring jets are firing,’ said Forrix, noticing tiny corrective flares of thrust along the length of the ship. ‘They’ve some power back.’

‘Not enough,’ said Falk. ‘This is just a last desperate attempt to put themselves as close to us as possible before their engines explode.’

‘You’re moving us clear?’ asked Kroeger.

‘Of course,’ snapped Falk, staring at a portion of the wall behind Kroeger, as though seeing something in the faded paintwork of the bulkhead. ‘I had to wait until your return, but yes, we’re moving away.’

‘Will we be in the blast radius when that thing goes up?’ asked Forrix.

Falk switched the floating graphic to one of concentric spheres of effect. The Iron Hands ship sat at the centre, with the *Andronicus* and the *Iron Blood* within the first impact ring.

‘Very much so,’ said Falk. ‘We’ll move away, but we’ll still likely take a beating.’

Perturabo held up a hand, his head cocked to one side as he studied the readings flaring from the hull and reactors of the enemy ship. He flicked between the energy emission readouts and the slowly rotating form of the Iron Hands vessel.

Forrix would relive this moment a hundred times or more in an attempt to interpret Perturabo’s expression. The corner of the primarch’s mouth twitched, as though in amusement, yet his eyes never lost their cold, calculating ice. His body language was tense, his battle-choler still to the fore, but with a sanguinity that took the edge from his raw aggression. The primarch was a mass of contradictions, but never more than at this moment.

‘Hold here,’ said Perturabo.

‘My lord?’ said Falk. ‘We’re still in the primary blast zone. An explosion at this range would do us some real damage.’

‘I said hold, Barban Falk, or do I need to repeat my orders to you every time?’

‘No, my lord,’ said Falk, swiftly cutting power to the engines and holding them in place. Forrix felt a growing apprehension, but he had no fear that Perturabo did not know what he was doing.

‘Armaments has a firing solution, my lord,’ said Kroeger.

‘Do not shoot,’ said Perturabo, moving to the front of the command deck and standing before the viewscreen. ‘I said that Fulgrim’s Legion would pay for the deaths we suffered. This is that payment.’

The engineering deck was as close an approximation of the ancients' idea of hell as could be imagined. A sweltering nightmare of scalding steam, superheated gases escaping from splitting conduits and glaring red light. The bodies of the dead lay strewn around the cavernous space, servitors whose innards had boiled and enginseers whose exo-armour had been breached by the crushing radiation bleeds and sudden thermal spikes.

Shadows moved in the sepulchral red gloom, monstrous beings with multiple arms and claws; the lords of this abode of the damned. Yet these were no daemons, but Iron Hands, the masters of this vessel and the very souls trying to save it.

Thamatica wrestled with multiple system outputs at once, letting the cognitive architecture scaffolded onto his brain by the Martian priests balance the woven threads of data at a speed beyond that which even the most gifted mortal could manage. To say that what he attempted was a delicate procedure was to say that advanced bio-augmetic neuro-surgery would be somewhat challenging to a feral world savage. The reactor loads were a hair's breadth from breaching their containment fields and turning the ship into an expanding cloud of radioactive dust.

The way Thamatica looked at it, if he were able to wrangle the colossal energies correctly then they *might* have a way out of this mess. If he couldn't, then they might at least do some damage to their attackers. The Emperor's Children vessel was pulling back from them, a swarm of firefly-bright traceries describing the arcs of escaping Stormbirds and recalled boarding torpedoes on magnetic tethers.

Curiously, the Iron Warriors vessel was no longer in retreat.

Did its captain suspect what he planned?

Perturabo was aboard the *Iron Blood*, so it was entirely possible.

But why hadn't he told the Emperor's Children?

Freeing his mind from thoughts of the past, Perturabo watched the gently rolling form of the *Sisypheum* with profound admiration for its crew. The *Iron Blood*'s data engines had finally identified the Iron Hands vessel, its up-armoured and heavily modified silhouette causing the pattern matching and energy signature algorithms numerous recognition errors along the way. Such were the differences in its structure and emissions that several iterations had even quantified it as a warship of the greenskins.

Perturabo had recognised the vessel long before, its underlying structure clear

to him beneath the upgrades, modifications and patch repairs effected by its crew. The Iron Hands ship was an ugly thing now, a prison shank compared to the gladiator's blade of the *Andronicus*. But a blade was a blade, and even the crudest could still kill.

And the crew of the *Sisypheum* had murder in mind.

A too-bright halo of nuclear reactions pulsed from its over-burdened engines. A tsunami of electromagnetic radiation bloomed from the *Sisypheum* to engulf the *Iron Blood* and *Andronicus*. Dozens of consoles blew out in a barrage of sparks and flame as unshielded systems fused and overloaded.

'Bones of Lochos!' Falk swore as his command console erupted in flames.

'Kroeger, do you still have a firing solution?' demanded Forrix.

'Not a chance, weapon auspex is blind.'

'Get it back,' ordered Forrix.

'Give me a minute,' snapped Kroeger, struggling with the few fire control systems that remained intact.

'We don't have a minute!' snarled Forrix, pushing Kroeger out of the way. The panel was a blackened mess, but enough systems remained active to launch an unguided spread of torpedoes and a mesh pattern barrage.

'Do nothing,' said Perturabo.

'But–'

'I said do nothing!' shouted Perturabo, but by then it was too late to do anything anyway.

A searing fireball of incandescent energy exploded from the *Sisypheum*'s engines like the tail of a comet approaching too close to a super-dense star. The vessel shot forwards like a missile fired from a shoulder launcher, accelerating from a virtual standstill to escape velocity in the blink of an eye.

The *Sisypheum* closed the distance to the *Andronicus* in a streak of laser brilliance and lanced into its flanks at a point just behind the beauteous vessel's plough-shaped bow. Gilded and ornamented as it was, the *Andronicus* was still a fighting vessel of the Legiones Astartes, and was armoured to withstand missiles, torpedoes and explosive ordnance.

Against the speed, mass and prow weapons of the *Sisypheum*, it had no chance.

The hull of the Emperor's Children vessel crumpled in the face of the tapered missile of the Iron Hands ship, the impact a punching thrust through its guts that sent billowing scads of ignited oxygen blossoming into space. The blazing wake of the Iron Hands ship ignited the atmosphere within the *Andronicus* and sheared

the prow from its body as keenly as a guillotine. The bow spun away on a spiralling wake of burning oxygen, and armoured plates along the entire front half of the vessel buckled and warped as internal explosions cascaded along its length. Fire spurted from ruptures in the hull and beams of brilliant light speared from compartment breaches as the cataclysmic damage burned the Emperor's Children vessel from the inside.

An expanding cone of fire and debris detonated outwards as the momentum and weapons fire of the *Sisypheum* punched through the vitals of the III Legion's ship. Like a bullet exploding from the body of a gunshot victim, the *Sisypheum* blasted from the interior of the *Andronicus*, trailing molten debris and a flame-wreathed halo of ignited plasma. It rippled with void haze, and Perturabo saw the tortured squalls of light tearing at the edges of the exit wound as its shields dragged kilometres' worth of armour plating in its magnetic wake.

Though notions of up and down were an irrelevance in space, the *Andronicus* listed downwards, swinging around like a punch-drunk fighter. Its gyroscopic systems fought to stabilise the vessel, but the damage was too severe, too sudden and too shocking to correct. Though her shipmaster fought to save her, Perturabo knew the *Andronicus* was doomed. Energy fields shimmered in a desperate attempt to preserve internal atmosphere as the front half of the vessel spun away. Its structural integrity gone, the *Andronicus* began to tear itself apart as its enormous mass and the eager riptides of the warp reached up to claim their prize.

'By the Twelve…' breathed Forrix, watching the awesome sight of a starship dying before his very eyes. To see a starfaring leviathan destroyed in battle was a sight no warrior could ever forget; the invincible defeated, the invulnerable humbled. The *Andronicus* was dead in space, its running lights flickering for a moment before being extinguished. The ship's engines still flared in fits and starts, twisting the gutted carcass from the carefully mapped path laid before them. In moments, it would be swallowed by the bleeding warp currents, another victim of the Empyrean's tempestuous wrath.

'Do you think anyone's left alive on there?' asked Falk.

'There will be some,' said Forrix, moving to the surveyor station and linking it to the launch decks. 'A few will have reached saviour pods, but some are still out in the void aboard Stormbirds and torpedoes. There're bound to be more left aboard the wreck too. I'm launching a full spread of rescue craft.'

Perturabo watched as the Trident began re-establishing control throughout the *Iron Blood*, establishing a contravallation of picket ships and organising the

rescue effort for the crew of the *Andronicus*. Thousands had died in its sudden, merciless demise, but Forrix could yet save hundreds with his unmatched logistical nous.

He watched the Iron Hands vessel twist on its axis, more agile than anything that ugly had a right to be. Still bleeding a tail of ignited plasma and mag-locked debris, the *Sisypheum* arced down towards a knot of storm clouds that looked to offer no easy way through.

‘My lord,’ said Kroeger, his fingertips hovering over fire control. ‘Do we shoot now?’

‘No,’ said Perturabo. ‘Leave them. They’ve earned that much.’

SEVENTEEN

The Tower

Fratricide

I Will Command

Unlike many of his brothers, Perturabo did not hate the Legions that had remained true to the Emperor. They were tools with which their father had carved out his empire, warriors as abused as Perturabo's sons, but too stubborn or too blind to see it. The Iron Hands were an honourable Legion, but they had changed in the centuries since Perturabo and his brother primarchs had each made that climb to the crenellated peak of the Astartes Tower to swear their oaths of moment.

Awaiting Fulgrim amid the structured chaos of his sanctum, with its stasis-sealed paintings, anatomical apparatus and half-built auto-matons, Perturabo toyed with the gear workings of a mechanical lion with carved lilies in its jaws. Remembering its construction back on Olympus, Perturabo broke his most inflexible rule and looked to the past. He thought back to his ascent up that polished marble spire, the night before leaving Terra for a life of war. Each step had required a superhuman effort of will, determination and courage. It was no simple screw-stair, but a challenge to the heart and intellect, a psychic communion with the Emperor himself that tested the very boundaries of a warrior's endurance. Not all of them had passed the test.

Perturabo was no longer sure *he* had passed the test.

Heroic operas had been composed that told of the mighty oaths sworn atop that great tower. Imagists of every stripe had tried to capture the majesty of the moment when each primarch had stepped from its gilded archway, and hundreds of dramaturges had attempted to render in poetic verse the idealism embodied in the idea of such a profound moment.

None of them had even come close to succeeding.

They thought the oath symbolic; an arbitrary moment chosen to mark the

beginning of something magnificent. They thought it powerful only for the instant of time it marked in the sand of Terra's history. Perturabo had replayed the memory of that day many times, subjecting the words that passed between him and his father to the scrutiny of a critic. Each interpretation of the words gave him no comfort in the coldness of solitude that betrayal brought; only reproach.

'You will be my hammer, Perturabo,' his father had said. 'What our enemies build to keep us from our destiny, you must put asunder.'

'No one shall build anything I cannot break open. No one.'

'I know,' said his father, turning His gaze to the stars. At the top of the world they were clear as diamonds, the Palace built high above the low-lying fug of chemical residue from centuries of war and its ashen aftermath. Perturabo followed his father's gaze, relishing the prospect of leading his warriors out to those selfsame stars.

'Great is the guilt of an unnecessary war, my son,' said his father. 'It stains the soul forever and is like a cancer that gnaws away all that was once good in a man. To send men to their deaths without noble purpose and consign those you fight to the grave is a burden no man can bear and no man should forgive. Always remember that, my son. Fight when you must, but wield the power of your Legion with a solemn heart. Once unleashed, the beast of war does not return to its iron cage until it has sated its hunger in the blood of innocents.'

The words had been said in a reflective tone, as though they carried his father's regret and a weight of bitter experience. Now they echoed from the past with a sting of prescience and a viper's bite of forewarning.

'But what I ask of you is necessary beyond the understanding of most men,' continued his father. 'Many in this new world think me vain-glorious, citing my hubris in declaring a manifest destiny to rule the stars, but they understand nothing of the truth of the universe. They cannot know that this is a war of species survival. Either we go out into the galaxy and win it in time or we will be consigned to a slow death or a stagnation that may be far worse.'

'Your sons will not let that happen.'

His father had smiled. 'It may already be inevitable.'

'Nothing is inevitable.'

'I hope you are right, Perturabo,' said his father, and a moment of genuine affection passed between them, the like of which Perturabo had not felt before and would never feel again. 'Over the centuries, our species has tried many ways of fighting the forces of evil: prayer, fasting, good works, ritual and holy books,

but that is not how we will fight it.’

‘Evil?’ Perturabo had asked.

‘A turn of phrase,’ said the Emperor, not quite convincingly. ‘All those ways were meaningless and ineffective, and saw millions dead. We, on the other hand, will fight with bolters, blades and the courage of the greatest warriors this galaxy has ever seen. *That* is how you fight evil.’

That word again.

‘The Iron Warriors are yours to command, father,’ said Perturabo. ‘Wherever our paths take us, whatever we meet and however long it takes, we will not fail you.’

His father turned to look at him, His golden eyes like two siege augers digging into Perturabo’s heart, coring his very essence and learning everything about him in the blink of an eye. But whatever He had seen was not reflected in His impenetrable expression, and Perturabo had spent long years trying to breach that wall.

The Emperor looked from the tower windows, over the mountains that pierced the highest clouds of the world, over the millions-strong workforce still set to transforming this mountain range into an edifice deserving of awe. His gaze encompassed everything laid before Him, from the newest settlements accruing around the Palace precincts to the distant war-ravaged lands of the fallen techno-barbarian kings, all the way to the farthest satrapies.

‘I can no longer see the paths and outcomes leading from this moment,’ said his father as anabatic winds lifting off the plain below filled the silence between them.

‘Is that why Magnus and his Legion remain on Terra while the rest of us crusade across the stars?’

‘Partly, though he will join you soon enough. I hope that one day Magnus will return to me again, for he sees much that I do not.’

‘He will not stay on crusade?’ said Perturabo, disappointed.

‘Magnus will return to Terra, but not for a very long time,’ said the Emperor, turning to him as though surprised at his dismay. ‘You and he are close?’

‘I’ve only met him a few times,’ said Perturabo after a moment’s consideration. ‘But, yes, I like him. He’s already helped me in translating some of the more obscure texts in my collection. I think he and I will be good friends.’

‘Why?’

It had seemed like a strange question, even then. Time and the later events at Nikaea only made it stranger, as though the Emperor had already known the path

upon which the Crimson King was setting his feet.

'We share a love of learning, and a hunger to know new things,' said Perturabo. 'After all, without culture and learning, what's the point of any crusade? To destroy, to lay waste? No, if a crusade is to have purpose, it needs to forge something better in its wake.'

'Ah, the words of your Firenzii polymath,' said the Emperor with a soft grin.

'And here I thought to pass it off as my own wisdom,' said Perturabo with a matching smile.

These words returned to him often, mocking what had become of the great vision promised by the Emperor. Two centuries of idealism and hope swept away in a spasm of rebellion, uncounted great works undone in an instant.

What would future historians make of Horus Lupercal's gamble? Would they pore over their dusty books and play out events long past and see what might have been? Perturabo dismissed the question as irrelevant; history was not a game that could be played out again and again to create fresh outcomes. What had happened had already happened, and what did not happen could not come to pass. Games of 'what if' might be diverting for scholars and theoreticians, but for warriors they were a distraction.

Fulgrim had climbed the Astartes Tower years before him, and Perturabo had often wondered what he and the Emperor had spoken about on their final night on Terra. Was the Phoenician plagued by memories in the dark watches of the night? Was he troubled by hidden meanings and subtexts in their father's words that only now became obvious?

Was there a voice in Fulgrim's head that whispered dark-hued truths?

The survivors from the *Andronicus* had been housed on one of the upper decks of the *Iron Blood* until the *Pride of the Emperor* was ready to retrieve them. In lieu of a large enough space to hold the three thousand souls rescued from the void, they had been housed amidships in what had once been the remembrancer decks. The interior of an Iron Warriors ship was a hard-edged, functional environment, with little in the way of superfluous space, but these decks reeked of abandonment. The thousands of remembrancers that had attended the Legion in the latter days of the Crusade years had lived and worked here, but they were all gone now, and none of the IV Legion made use of those dark spaces. Scraps of the remembrancers' graffiti still lingered on the walls, snatches of poetry, pornographic caricatures and hastily drawn musical scales, but many were now obscured by bloody handprints and spattered arcs of dried gore.

Honourable Soulaka made his way through the host of mortals and legionaries that thronged the cramped, low-ceilinged corridors with a growing sense of disbelief and outrage. Legionary bodies were laid out in random piles with triage marks on their shoulder guards, though it was clear that no one had attended to even those in need of immediate aid. The stench of open wounds was strong, as was the overpowering aroma of gene-modified coagulant that meant a great many Legion warriors had been badly wounded.

Iron Warriors Apothecaries had immediately made their way to the remembrancer decks without any orders needing to be given, but the survivors of the *Andronicus* turned them away. Soulaka alone remained, hoping against hope that he might see some of the creatures the Stonewrought had described after his abortive sojourn at the Emperor's Children's revels. Howls like the hunting cries of crag-raptors drew him deeper into the twisting maze of corridors, the wet-throated sounds amplified by the metal walls and distorted by the many turns. Dissonant bass notes thrummed the air and a skirling, squealing whine scratched on his nerves like badly-tuned vox-output, but he could see no source for these grating sounds.

Injured legionaries sat in pools of sticky blood, ignored by all except a handful of III Legion medicae-implanted servitors, cybernetic slave creatures that were only ever intended for low-priority walking wounded. No one of any apparent skill appeared to be tending to the mortally injured amongst the survivors.

It made no sense to Soulaka.

Without Apothecaries, a great many warriors would die who did not need to.

Without speedy implementation of reductor protocols, the gene-seed of the dead would be lost, but the Emperor's Children didn't seem to care. The most precious resource of a Legion, and the Phoenician's warriors were heedless of its loss.

The deeper into the remembrancer decks Soulaka went, the more he began to suspect why.

A great many of the Emperor's Children had diverged so far from their original gene-template that it was almost impossible to recognise them as legionaries any more.

Or to know if their gene-seed could even be conventionally harvested.

Soulaka saw a warrior with a shattered breastplate, beneath which he observed a broad chest that resembled the rugose flesh of a reptile's belly, another whose arm bent in ways that indicated the presence of far too many joints, and yet a third whose battle helm appeared to have fused with the meat of his skull, such

that there was no telling where armour ended and flesh began.

And these were among the least of the changes he saw.

Eyes of multifarious hues and facets stared angrily at him, as though he were the intruder on their vessel. Instead of an Apothecary attempting to help those in need of medical attention, he felt like a neophyte scout on his first mission behind enemy lines who'd just given away his position.

He moved quickly, cataloguing the various deformities and mutilations worked into the bodies of the Emperor's Children. Some were clearly surgical adaptations, but others could only be the result of manipulation of the gene-seed. That anyone had the skill to do such a thing beyond the hidden laboratoria on Terra and Mars was astounding, but having heard what the Stonewrought had said upon his return from the *Pride of the Emperor*, there could be only one man capable of such a feat.

Soulaka heard a groaning gurgle of breath beside him and felt questing fingers weakly grasp his leg. He looked down to see a wounded warrior whose cyanotic complexion and bloodied eyes spoke of dreadful hypoxia and flash depressurisation injures. This warrior had been blown out into the vacuum of space without any means of life support, and that he had survived at all was a testament to the robustness of Space Marine physiology.

The legionary was blind; his eyes had literally filled with blood until they ruptured.

'Apothecary?' said the warrior. 'I'm hurt…'

Soulaka knelt beside him and grimaced as he saw the rings and toothed hooks stitched into his face. The warrior gripped the barbed haft of a whip that lay coiled beside him like a sleeping snake. Soulaka blinked as he thought he saw the toothed length of the whip twitch in recognition of his scrutiny.

'Tell me your name,' said Soulaka.

'Kalimos,' said the warrior. 'Ah… the pain…'

Soulaka nodded and held out his arm, letting the narthecium's auspex play over Kalimos and collect diagnostic information that would allow him to treat the warrior's wounds. His injuries were severe: many of Kalimos's internal organs already damaged beyond repair by oxygen starvation, and those that remained were on the verge of complete failure. He was not beyond saving, and with a full suite of medicae tools, Soulaka could restore Kalimos to the fighting ranks within a few days.

'I can fix you,' said Soulaka. 'But I need to get you to the apothecarion.'

Kalimos twitched as a spasm of agony passed through him. He licked a

bifurcated tongue over his cracked lips, and Soulaka saw that his canines had been replaced by implants of razor-sharp surgical steel.

‘You are not Third Legion,’ said Kalimos, twin runnels of blood flowing from the corners of his mouth. ‘You don’t know, do you?’

‘I don’t know what?’ said Soulaka, leaning in.

‘The pain…’ said Kalimos.

‘I can help with that,’ said Soulaka, extending his narthecium.

Kalimos slapped the surgical device away and shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘The pain… It’s exquisite, you see. I never knew how good it could feel… to die…’

His head slumped to one side, and Soulaka needed no warning tone from the narthecium to tell him that Kalimos was dead. Soulaka had seen many warriors die before him, but this death sat badly with him.

No Space Marine should welcome death.

‘Your war is over, Legionary Kalimos,’ said Soulaka, placing a hand on the dead legionary’s shoulder. ‘And I will honour your memory with the promise that your gene-seed will live on.’

Soulaka carefully removed the dead warrior’s plastron to reveal a bodyglove wired with the electrical conductor pads from a defibrillator. An extruded scalpel blade cut through the toughened fabric, and he bared Kalimos’s wide, flattened chest, thick with the ridges of the ossified bone shield. Tattoos of writhing snakes engaged in what looked like either coitus or battle slithered across the bruised skin, and the inks glistened with strange hues that made Soulaka strangely unsettled.

He tapped a memorised code into his narthecium and it altered its configuration in a series of rotating, shifting panels to emit a puff of icy air. The reductor’s drill core snapped from the upper edges of his gauntlet as a series of glass tubes slotted home behind it. Soulaka sprayed sterilising solutions over the centre of the dead warrior’s chest and swabbed the area clear of contaminants.

Resting the flesh drill against Kalimos’s chest, Soulaka engaged the penetrating spectra of his visor to locate the implanted progenoid. Soulaka could extract a dead warrior’s gene-seed under battlefield conditions in less than thirty seconds, but it took him almost that long to locate the progenoid amid the confusion of biology he saw within Kalimos.

Organs and artificial trunkways threaded his body, linked to his nervous system in ways he had never seen or imagined were possible. A panoply of hybrid organs and unknown biological hardware packed the man’s chest, most of

which had no business being inside a living being.

Eventually, he found what he was looking for – the small, plum-shaped organ connected to a host of mysterious fleshy tendrils as thin as hairs.

‘Now what might be going on here?’ he wondered as he engaged the energised edges of the drill and pressed down hard to break through the layered bone protecting the organs within. Laser cutters burned through flesh and bone as internal tubing siphoned the blood away, and Kalimos jerked as the laser sent pulses of electrical energy through the strange pathways of his body. Fresh blood leaked from his ruptured eyeballs, and an exhalation of what sounded like pleasure sighed from between his blue lips.

The drill clamped in place and the automated mechanisms of the reductor finished its work. Carefully, Soulaka withdrew the drill as the hollow tubes filled with blood and the squirming lump of the harvested organ. The blade self-sterilised and the reductor retracted into his gauntlet, sealing the precious gene-seed within.

‘Is that really yours to take?’ said a voice behind Soulaka, and he jumped in surprise, reaching for the bolt pistol at his hip. A hand flashed out, swift as thought, and clamped down on the butt of the weapon before his own could reach it.

‘Now, now, not so hasty,’ said a warrior with a face full of scars and an arrogant, cocksure glint in his eyes. ‘We’re all friends here, are we not?’

‘Who are you?’ asked Soulaka, slowly lifting his hand away from his holster.

‘Lucius,’ said the warrior, kneeling beside Kalimos.

‘Where are your Legion’s Apothecaries?’ demanded Soulaka. ‘There are legionaries dying here. They could be saved.’

Lucius ignored the question and freed the toothed whip from the dead man’s grip.

‘You won’t be needing this then, Kalimos,’ he said, relishing the feel of the barbed grip in his bare hand. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of it for you.’

‘Did you hear what I said?’ said Soulaka.

‘I heard,’ said Lucius, standing and hanging the coiled whip from a hook on his belt. Now that he took a moment to study this Lucius, he saw a man perfectly in balance with his physique, a killer with an intimate knowledge of his body’s limitations.

‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘Where are your Apothecaries?’

‘Only one came aboard your iron ship,’ said Lucius. ‘And I don’t think he’s particularly interested in *saving* lives.’

‘Then what kind of Apothecary is he?’

Lucius leaned in close, and Soulaka could taste the sourness of his breath, the rank sweat of his unwashed body and the blood of fresh scarring.

‘The kind that’s standing right behind you,’ said Lucius.

Soulaka spun around and found himself face to face with a gaunt-featured cadaver of a man with thready white hair, the blackest eyes and a cloak of leathered flesh over his armour of purple and gold. A leprous form of servo-harness sprouted from his back, and he carried an elongated needle pistol in slender, mantis-like fingers.

Soulaka heard a tiny *thip* sound and felt a sharp sting at his neck, like an insect bite.

He reached up and tugged a sliver of hollow crystal from his neck. A droplet of blood hung suspended at the tip, like a ruby tear. He tried to make sense of what he was seeing, but his mind was suddenly fogged and sluggish.

‘Fabius?’ he said, his voice sounding as though it echoed from the bottom of a deep chasm.

‘None other,’ said the man, who reached out and lowered him to the ground as the strength poured from Soulaka’s body. He tried to speak, but Fabius hushed him with a finger placed tenderly over his lips.

‘The xyclos toxin thrives on resistance and will make your suffering much worse should you desire to die in pain,’ said Fabius.

Soulaka could no longer feel his limbs and he nodded, as though what Fabius was saying was the most natural thing in the world.

‘You took something that does not belong to you,’ said Fabius, expertly opening Soulaka’s code-locked reductor to remove the gene-seed he had taken from Kalimos.

‘No, I…’ said Soulaka, but whatever he had been about to say slipped away.

Fabius placed something heavy against his chest.

Soulaka looked down and though he knew he should recognise the device, its name and purpose escaped him. Fabius pressed hard and Soulaka grunted as laser-edged blades spun up to cutting speed, coring down through the layers of his plastron and the thickened bone of his chest. He felt the device boring deep into his body, but there was no pain. Which was good. He felt a tugging sensation inside him as an internal organ was cut free. Tears welled in the corners of his eyes, though he could not say why.

Fabius leaned in close to whisper in his ear. ‘Tell me your name.’

‘What–?’

‘Your name,’ said the white-haired angel of death. ‘What is it?’

That at least he *did* know.

‘I am Honourable Soulaka,’ he said, pleased to have remembered this fact.

‘Honourable? You are a mason master?’ asked Fabius.

‘I am,’ said Soulaka.

‘Interesting,’ said Fabius.

Soulaka looked down. A neat hole had been bored through his breastplate. Blood coated his armour with a glistening sheen, and a viscous froth of blood and bone fragments pooled in his lap. The Apothecary of the Emperor’s Children cradled a metallic vial, upon which the spidery arms of his bio-harness scratched two words: *Honourable Soulaka*.

With his last breath of life, Soulaka fell back on the one source of strength left to him.

‘From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From…’

His words faded away.

‘Yes,’ said Fabius. ‘Your gene-seed should be ripe with potential.’

Fulgrim took his time in answering the summons, but Perturabo had expected that, and his humours were in balance when the layered doors swung open. The robots of the Iron Circle brought their threat sensors to bear, but Perturabo waved them down as Fulgrim swept inside with a tired, pained expression.

Perturabo’s attention was focused on a clockwork automaton: the working model of a Warhound Titan that was almost as fully functional as the real thing. Its upper carapace was hinged open, revealing a fiendishly complex latticework of gears, cogs and timing shafts. The metronomic beat of its mechanical heart *tick tocked* to a precise rhythm, and the miniature screwdriver Perturabo held was no thicker than a human hair.

Two of the Iron Circle moved aside to allow Fulgrim within, and behind him came two of his captains – Kaesoron and Vairosean – together with the limping form of his last Lord Commander, Eidolon. Behind them came his Trident, who moved to take position at the cardinal points of a triangle around him. Perturabo gave Forrix a slow nod.

Fulgrim glanced around, and seeing that little – if anything – had changed from his last visit to Perturabo’s sanctum, lost interest in surroundings that would have captivated Terran scholars for months. Fulgrim was clad in his battle

armour, bearing a fresh coat of paint that was almost painfully vivid in its colouring. The amethyst and gold were somehow too *real*, too sharp-edged; as though painted on the surface of his retinas.

‘Sit,’ said Perturabo.

For a moment, he thought Fulgrim would refuse, the command too imperious, too demeaning in the presence of their subordinates. Though he knew it was a childish ploy that a narcissist like Fulgrim would see through in a heartbeat, he ignored his brother and continued working on the Warhound’s interior.

Just as he judged Fulgrim was about to speak, he said, ‘I summoned you five hours ago.’

‘I am aware of that,’ said Fulgrim, tight-lipped and bowstring taut. ‘But I just lost a warship, so my attention has been somewhat diverted.’

‘You needlessly lost a warship,’ pointed out Perturabo.

‘Is that why you summoned me to your tinker’s workshop?’ snapped Fulgrim. ‘To berate me for showing a measure of intrepidity? If you have brought me here to gloat or say *I told you so*, then you can save your breath. I will not apologise for wanting to learn more of those who would oppose us.’

‘And what did you learn?’ said Perturabo, finally looking up from his working. ‘What great revelations do your monsters bring us from so bold an expedition?’

Fulgrim said nothing and cast his gaze around the room, as though the paintings, anatomical diagrams and mathematical proofs were now of sudden interest to him. His gaze hardened as his eyes alighted on the sketches over Perturabo’s shoulder, and he knew exactly what Fulgrim was going to say before he said it.

‘How did you get those drawings?’

‘Which ones?’

‘The gruesome ones,’ said Fulgrim. ‘The ones showing what looks like…’

‘Primarch anatomy? You know how I got them.’

Fulgrim nodded and an ugly expression of bitter jealousy clouded his features.

‘I remember little of the time before our scattering,’ said Fulgrim with a dismissive shrug.

‘You remembered enough to pass on something to your fleshsmith.’

‘Fabius?’ said Fulgrim. ‘No, I gave him nothing except permission to explore to the furthest reaches of his knowledge.’

‘Really? You told him nothing?’

‘Well, I may have pointed him in certain directions,’ admitted Fulgrim, ‘but the work he has done is all his own. Admittedly, what he has manufactured so far

leaves something to be desired, but no great art is ever achieved without effort and blood.'

'It is wrong,' said Perturabo.

'Wrong?' said Fulgrim, as though the word were anathema to him. 'Haven't you seen yet? There *is* no right and wrong. We are beings of will and desire, and only by exercising the former and indulging the latter do we move closer to ultimate perfection. Fabius's imperfect science might be crafting monsters just now, but eventually he will create something godlike.'

'All he will create are bastard hybrids, mongrel half-breeds that should be strangled at birth,' said Perturabo. 'You should stop what he is doing before it goes any further.'

'I will not,' stated Fulgrim.

Perturabo sighed and returned his attention to the clockwork model of the Warhound.

'You are never so certain as when you don't know just how wrong you can be,' he said, picking up his tools and working on the machine's interior once again.

'Is it broken?' asked Fulgrim.

'The perpetual motion driver at its heart is losing time,' said Perturabo.

'I thought that was impossible.'

'On the contrary,' said Perturabo, tightening a screw no larger than a grain of sand. 'A genius of Old Earth discovered the theoretical principles thousands of years ago, but he lacked the technology to manufacture a working prototype. I have many of his journals and secret papers in my library and was able to extrapolate what had been lost to draw up the schematics for Vulkan to build.'

Fulgrim nodded, already bored. 'I would have thought Vulkan would have better things to do with his forges, like making guns and swords.'

'Then you don't know him at all,' said Perturabo. 'His love of the forge encompasses all things, from crafting weapons to fashioning miniature wonders of artifice.'

'But that one isn't working?' asked Fulgrim. 'Then he's not as good as I heard.'

'No, it was perfect,' said Perturabo. 'It was damaged during the fighting at Phall. It fell from a shelf and the mechanism was knocked out of alignment. If you listen closely, you can hear the variation in each cycle of its mechanical heart.'

Perturabo reached out and placed the Warhound on the workbench in front of Fulgrim.

‘I have no interest in your toys,’ he said.

‘Listen,’ insisted Perturabo.

Fulgrim sighed and leaned in close to the table, turning his head to listen.

Perturabo’s hand flashed out and gripped Fulgrim’s hair. With sudden force, he slammed his brother’s face into the Warhound. The wondrous automaton shattered into a thousand pieces as Fulgrim’s head crunched into the pitted surface of the workbench.

Bone broke and blood spattered. Cogs flew, tiny springs and gear levers spun off.

Fulgrim cried out in painful shock and his captains surged forwards.

The Iron Circle smashed them aside with wrecking-ball blows from their energy shields and before the Emperor’s Children could recover, the Trident were upon them. Perturabo hauled Fulgrim over the workbench, scattering drawings, fragile tools, schematics and half-finished sketches. Though Fulgrim was fully armoured, Perturabo lifted him by the neck with no more effort than lifting a mortal man. Fulgrim spat blood, and Perturabo slammed his fist into his brother’s face, snapping his head back with a crack of bone.

Fulgrim’s eyes blazed black and his face glimmered with reptilian malice.

He started to speak, but Perturabo didn’t give him the chance. Like a fist-fighter going for the kill, he battered his brother’s face with pistoning jabs until he had him backed up against an iron column. He pinned Fulgrim in place and drew back his free hand to reach for *Forgebreaker*.

The hammer rose, but Perturabo left the blow hanging.

Fulgrim’s perfect face was a wet meat wound, leaking blood, snot and tears. His breath was hoarse and clogged with phlegm and broken teeth, his eyes were swollen shut. He tried to speak, but Perturabo cut him off again.

‘No, brother,’ he said. ‘I am speaking now, and you *will* listen to me.’

Falk, Kroeger and Forrix hauled Fulgrim’s captive officers over, powerful arms wrapped around their necks and wide-bore pistols jammed in hard to their flesh.

‘I have bitten my tongue and allowed you to bring my Legion into this place,’ said Perturabo. ‘I have followed your lead in all things, I have listened to your tall tales and allowed you to set the pace of this expedition.’

Perturabo leaned forwards and said, ‘That ends now.’

He released Fulgrim, who held himself erect in the face of Perturabo’s cold anger.

‘Your warriors have no discipline, monsters fight your battles and you have

allowed an entire vessel to be sacrificed in the name of vanity, but no more. From here onwards, I am in charge and for the duration of this mission, your Legion is mine to command. Your warriors will obey *my* orders, they will follow *my* lead, and they will do nothing except by *my* command. If you agree to that, then we will continue on into the Eye of Terror and finish this together. If you don't, then I will take my Legion and leave you here. Do you understand?'

Fulgrim nodded and swallowed a mouthful of blood.

'I understand, brother,' he said, his voice a gargled, mangled mockery of its once perfect cadence. 'I understand that you humble me and expect me to swallow my pride. To be your lapdog.'

'I don't need a damn lapdog,' snarled Perturabo. 'I need an equal.'

'But I am not your equal, brother,' said Fulgrim, grinning through his bloodied features, as though this outburst of violence was somehow amusing. 'I surpass you in every way.'

'And yet I'm the one holding the hammer,' said Perturabo.

'You say you want an equal, but where is the equality when you secure my assent at the end of a weapon?'

Perturabo lowered *Forgebreaker* and harnessed it across his shoulder once again. He turned to the Trident and said, 'Release them.'

'My lord,' said Barban Falk. Kaesoron struggled in his grip, despite the pistol wedged under his stretched open jaws. 'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure,' said Perturabo. 'Because the lesson of history tells me that the best way to get what you want is to make sure you give the other man something too.'

'And what do you give me?' said Fulgrim, coughing a wad of red-flecked saliva.

'I let you live,' said Perturabo.

'That's not much to give.'

'It's what I'm offering. Take it or leave it. Take it, and no one in the room will ever speak of this. You have my word on that.'

Fulgrim shrugged, as though the matter was of no consequence. He looked down at Perturabo's chest and smiled with reptilian hunger.

'I see I have misjudged you, brother,' he said. 'Do you know how long it has been since anyone has caused me real pain? No, of course, you don't. But trust me, it's been a while.'

The swelling around Fulgrim's jaw was already fading. Shattered bones in his cheek and nose and jaw would be knitting, and the bruises around his eyes were

yellowing. Primarchs healed fast, but Perturabo was impressed at the speed with which Fulgrim's body was undoing the damage he had suffered.

'So do we have an agreement?'

'We do,' said Fulgrim, running his hands through his hair and giving his warriors a curt nod. The Trident released their charges, but instead of the expected posturing and threats, Fulgrim's captains merely followed the Phoenician as he strode away. Perturabo watched him go, surprised Fulgrim had agreed so readily, but content he had shown his brother that he would not be so casually disobeyed.

The encounter with Fulgrim had left him drained, and he let out a shuddering breath, rubbing his hand over his scalp. His eyes were gritty with exhaustion and he needed a drink. The violent urges of his triarchs were a potent cocktail of combat stimms and aggression pheromones, chemical precursors to a fight that hadn't happened. Kroeger was disappointed more blood had not been shed, and Falk's fists were still balled in anticipation of killing.

Only Forrix looked uncomfortable at what had just happened, picking over the smashed remains of the broken Warhound.

'Something troubles you, my triarch?' asked Perturabo.

'I don't know why, but I've always hated this model,' said Forrix. 'Though I'm sad to see it destroyed.'

'That's not what I meant,' said Perturabo. 'You think I was wrong to bloody Fulgrim?'

'No.'

'You are a poor liar, Forrix.'

'I don't think you were wrong to bloody him, my lord,' said Forrix. 'But did you have to humiliate him in front of his warriors?'

'Fulgrim needed to be taught a lesson,' said Kroeger.

'That he did,' agreed Forrix, lifting a tiny cog-toothed wheel and turning it in a slow circle between his thumb and forefinger. 'But if you're going to skin a cat, you don't keep it around as a house pet.'

BOOK THREE

CONIUNCTIO

Theogonies – III

The ruined manufactory provided shelter from the wire storm, keeping the three of them alive while the razor-flecked particulates howled and surged beyond the irradiated skin of the building. Ptolea and Sullax had complained about the need to stop here, but what was the alternative? To suffer the ravages of a storm that could strip a man to the bone inside of a minute? Yes, the rad-counters were in the red, but Coryn knew the danger would pass before they'd suffer hazardous levels of exposure.

People said that places like this had once been generating stations, that it had taken dangerous materials and employed forgotten technology to harness its power. Well that power had evidently turned on its makers, and laid waste to the planet, releasing toxins that had burned the atmosphere and boiled the oceans away.

Their structures were irradiated and would remain so for thousands of years. That was the only reason they hadn't been torn down and their materials reused.

Everything was reused in Callax – the bleak, iron-walled fortress factory Coryn called home. Almost nothing was new, everything had once been something else. The planet's only readily available water was what could be extracted from the air by the towering vapour mills, and the food was reconstituted from yesterday's bodily waste. Coryn had never known anything different, but the chapbook his father had given him on his fifth birthday spoke of the ancient gods and their sumptuous banquets, tables groaning with endless goblets of pure water and rich food that hadn't been scraped from recycling vats or processed a thousand times to remove any impurities.

The book had belonged to Coryn's great-great-grandfather, and its pages were brittle and thin, yet the inked pictures were still vivid and full of life. They were the only spots of colour in Coryn's bleak, grey existence. They showed skies of blue and gold, with hundreds of lights that his father had told him were stars. His father said there were still stars up there, beyond the Umbral, but no one really believed that. His father said a lot of things, but no one believed much of what the old man had to say. His days were numbered anyway, his limbs too

weak to work the forges and his mind too prone to straying to be of any use in the logistical executives.

Coryn unzipped his padded jerkin and slipped the book from his shirt, taking great care not to damage its cover and whisper-thin pages. While the storm blew out the worst of its flensing rage on the building's exterior, he read stories he knew by heart, but still enjoyed for the respite they provided from the miserable labours of daily life.

'Still reading your children's stories?' said Ptolea, trudging into the room and wiping glittering flecks of steel wool from her padded jerkin. She sat down next to him with her back to the wall and her knees drawn up in front of her.

'They're not children's stories,' he said.

'Don't see the point of them,' said Ptolea, lighting a smoke that was mostly sweepings from a factory floor. The smell was terrible, but Coryn wasn't about to deny his friend one of the few pleasures left to her. 'What's the point of reading about things that don't exist?'

Coryn turned the book around and showed her a page featuring a warrior in blue armour wrestling with a great serpentine creature with many arms.

'Because they're better than the things that do,' he said.

'Pretty,' she said and reached out to take the book, but he pulled it back to his chest.

'Sorry,' he said by way of apology. 'It's delicate. Kind of a family heirloom. I always hoped I'd pass it on to my kids, you know, if I get permission.'

Sullax stomped in from outside and also swept himself clear of wiry dust particles.

'Won't be any chance of children if we stay here much longer,' said Sullax, cupping his groin. 'Place is buzzing with radiation. Bloody stupid idea coming out here.'

'You didn't have to come,' pointed out Coryn.

'Course I did,' said Sullax, as though he were being obtuse. 'You're my work-brother, and I need to keep you alive.'

'Touching,' said Ptolea.

'Yeah – if he dies, I need to make up his quota,' growled Sullax, only half-joking.

Coryn didn't answer, well aware that it was a risky venture they were on, but unwilling to admit that to his fellow scouts. He'd had to fight to persuade the executive to let him take the patrol out in the first place. The last thing he needed was to bring back dead bodies torn up by a wire storm or dosed with radiation

that would make them infertile or, worse, unproductive.

He wasn't sure what had driven him to venture beyond the safety of Callax's hermetic walls, but the sight of that violet cometary fall had struck a chord in him that was still thrumming with purpose. Coryn had to know what it was, and he'd managed to convey that passion to the grey-suited members of the executive. Perhaps it was evidence of another surviving world, a link to their lost history and the other planets that were said to have existed once beyond the Umbral. Perhaps it might be the remains of a satellite whose orbit had decayed enough for gravity finally to drag it down.

Either reason was good enough to warrant a patrol, but the only resources the executive had seen fit to allocate him were two other scouts. Both of whom, they insisted, had to be volunteers. Naturally he'd picked his dwelling-sister and his work-brother. Neither believed this was a good idea, but neither had they liked the idea of him going into the chem wilderness alone.

The comet had fallen no more than a couple of kilometres beyond the walls, but it was still a difficult and dangerous journey. They hadn't been allocated any transport, and had been forced to trudge through the ash and rock on foot. Beneath the perpetually grey sky, they'd just about reached the haunches of the mountains that rose up behind Callax when the wire storm had set in and driven them to take shelter in the ruined power plant.

'Looks like it's dying down,' noted Ptolea, leaning up to peer through a crack in the steel panelling. 'It'll be nasty and sore, but we can make good time and be back before next shift.'

'Come on then,' sighed Sullax. 'Some sleep before shift would be good.'

Coryn felt a surge of guilt and tried to keep it from his face. Shifts in the factories, reclamation plants and vapour mills were hard enough, never mind trying to get through one without enough rest.

They pulled their chem cloaks on and settled their masks in place before making their way back down to ground level and setting off into the blunted teeth of the wire storm.

Ptolea had been right, its fury had passed its peak and the vortex at its centre was already moving on. He felt the stinging impacts of the sharp-edged particulate matter battering his heavy canvas trousers and padded jacket, knowing his skin would be dotted with tiny blood blisters when he removed his protective outer layers. But the farther they went, the less intense the surges and squalls became, until he could at last see the edges of the mountain.

It wasn't difficult to see where the meteorite had come down.

A smoking furrow of rock had been carved from the low foothills, the edges sagging and molten-looking. Pyroclastic material fell like hot black rain, smelling of burned metal. Coryn let some of it settle on his gloved palm and held it out to the others.

'Carbon re-entry burn residue?' he asked. 'From a starship?'

'Maybe,' said Ptolea, but Coryn heard the excitement in her voice.

They marched into the newly created valley, its sides glassy and vitrified by the passage of whatever had carved it. Sheltered now from the last remnants of the storm, Coryn lifted his mask, and took a breath of air. It was utterly still and calm and smelled sweet and fragrant, free of the toxins he'd expect to taste, more like the oils rubbed on newborn babes.

'Still think this was a waste of time?' he asked Sullax.

'I don't know yet,' said Sullax. 'Depends what's at the end of this.'

'Better this than a shift at the fans,' said Ptolea, moving on.

Coryn and Sullax joined her and they moved deeper into the slice cut in the rock. A hundred metres or so away, a shimmer of light lit the far end of the furrow. Clearly whatever had fallen here was still white hot. They approached cautiously, but as the distance closed, Coryn began to realise that what he was seeing was not the remains of a crashed satellite or a downed spaceship.

He didn't know what it was.

It was light, a cohering illumination that filled the end of the valley with its brilliant glow. Coryn stared at it, trying to pin some kind of form upon it, but all he could see were fleeting images and shapes: eyes, golden wings, a thousand wheels turning like the heart of the mightiest machine, multiple impossibly latticed genetic helices interleaving in a billion times a billion complex ways.

'What the bastard hell is *that thing?' demanded Sullax, unlimbering the single-shot rifle he carried. 'Is is dangerous?'*

'I don't know what it is,' said Coryn. 'But I don't think it's dangerous.'

'How do you know?' asked Ptolea.

'I just do,' said Coryn, and he did. Though he did not know how he knew, he appreciated that whatever this light was, it had not come to harm them. He moved towards the light as it began to coil into itself, reshaping its form into something wondrous, a being reborn in its own self-immolation.

He felt something brush his mind, a presence greater than anything he could possibly have imagined. Everything he was, it knew. Everything he knew, it knew. He felt no violation at this, the presence was wholly benign. Tentative even, like a hand offered in friendship to a beautiful stranger.

As the light was pulled into itself, a shape began to form, and Coryn gasped as he saw what lay at its heart.

A baby boy, as perfect as any born to one of the gene-pure hermetics.

'I don't believe it,' said Sullax.

'It's impossible,' added Ptolea.

'No,' said Coryn, kneeling beside the baby. 'It's the miracle we've been waiting for.'

The child's skin was radiant, as though the light that had surrounded him had been somehow incorporated into his very flesh. The baby gurgled happily at the sight of him and reached up to him with a smile that seemed far too knowing for something that had only just come into being.

'Don't touch it,' warned Sullax. 'It could be dangerous.'

'It's only a baby,' said Coryn. 'Babies aren't dangerous.'

'You don't know what it is,' said Sullax. 'We should kill it and be done.'

'Kill him?' snapped Coryn. 'What are you talking about?'

Sullax drew his knife. 'It's an orphan, and you know the rules about orphans. They don't get to be a burden on the rest of us.'

'We're not killing him,' said Coryn, lifting the baby into his arms. The child's flesh was warm to the touch and that warmth spread into every cell of Coryn's body in a fiercely protective surge.

'Put the knife away,' said Ptolea.

'Trust me, I'll be doing us a favour if I take the knife to its neck,' said Sullax. 'Who's going to raise it? You? Him? You don't need that extra burden when it's not blood of your blood.'

'I said put the knife down,' said Ptolea as the light of the baby spread over her face.

'No,' hissed Sullax, reaching to snatch the baby from Coryn's arms.

Ptolea's bullet punched out through the back of Sullax's head, and he dropped to his knees before toppling onto his side. Blood pooled at their feet, and though Coryn knew he should be shocked at the killing of his work-brother, he felt nothing.

Sullax's death left him cold.

He saw that Ptolea understood, her face radiant and free of any guilt at taking the shot.

Sullax had threatened the perfect child and had suffered accordingly.

Coryn looked down as he heard a gurgle of something liquid at his feet and saw a trickle of water running from a crack in the ground where the baby boy

had lain. That trickle grew to a steady flow, until crystal-clear water was pouring from the depths of the earth in a river. Water flowed around them, washing the blood and chem-dust from their boots and filling the air with its purity.

'He brought the waters,' said Coryn, handing the baby boy to Ptolea. She cradled his tiny body with a love the equal of any new mother holding her child for the first time. Coryn took the chapbook from his shirt pocket and flicked through its pages, heedless of the paper fragments that fell from its crumbling spine and disintegrated in the water.

'Look,' he said, tears flowing down his face as he held the book out to Ptolea.

The pages depicted an ancient creation myth, a purple-hued god rising from primordial waters to bring life to a barren world where nothing ever grew, but which was now reborn as a fertile paradise.

'Who is that?' asked Ptolea.

'It's the water-bringer,' said Coryn. 'Fulgrim.'

EIGHTEEN

See it Done

Crone World

City of the Dead

Exacting attention to detail had served Perturabo well in his centuries of life. In war and at peace, he revelled in the minutiae of any given task, be it reducing an alien fortress to rubble or establishing the golden ratio within every portion of a theoretical design. Angron had berated him for wasting time on irrelevant details, while Guilliman had lauded him for his thoroughness.

Two very different characters, two very different opinions.

Both were correct in their own way, but neither fully appreciated his methodology or the bitter drive behind his exacting preferences. The need to be better, the urge to prove his worth beyond taking the metal to the stone.

Perturabo was a craftsman, and to be worthy of the appellation, every piece of work that bore his name must be judged for as long as it stood. His legacy was to leave no undertaking unfinished.

Every task was approached as though it might be his last, and this was no different.

His sanctum was draped in shadows, the grand designs and priceless artworks hung on the walls kept hidden from sight. The automatons were slumped and silent on their shelves, with only the rustle of stacked weapon schemata on curling wax paper to disturb the silence. Not even the distant throb of the *Iron Blood*'s engines intruded upon his introspective isolation.

Spread before him like components of the most intricate chronometer imaginable, were the pieces of the smashed Warhound automaton. Fulgrim's head had broken it into fragments, and Perturabo was painstakingly repairing it. It had been an act of impulse to destroy the Warhound – one calculated to drive a point home, but impulsive nonetheless.

Bent over his workbench, Perturabo gently teased out a bend in a cogwheel,

using the microscopic tines of precision callipers to realign each miniature tooth. It would be the work of months to repair it fully, but Perturabo had always believed that once a task was begun, only a lesser man would fail to see it through to the end.

Ten days had passed since his assault on his brother.

Perturabo did not regret the act, but Forrix's words had struck a chord within him. It *was* foolish to trust to the word of a narcissistic egomaniac. The Trident had urged him to lead the Iron Warriors fleet from the Eye of Terror – his newly chosen name already gaining currency – and return to the Warmaster's side, but he had given Fulgrim his oath that he would see this to the end and that was that.

Perturabo knew his brother would betray him. He was resigned to its inevitability. Such individuals could never be relied upon to do anything other than further their own interests, and Fulgrim was no exception. The only question was when the betrayal would come.

Speculation was pointless. It would happen, and he would be ready for it.

Part of him looked forward to it.

At least then he would be freed from his obligation to Fulgrim.

Satisfied that the cogwheel was returned to its original form, Perturabo carefully placed it back where it had come from and slotted the tool into its compartment. He straightened and rubbed the heels of his palms over his face. His eyes were heavy and felt gritty, as though he had not rested or had slept badly.

Perturabo sat back and poured himself a heavy goblet of wine from a bronze ewer. Bitter and flavoured with almonds and gene-recovered spices from Terra, the beverage was one fermented by a son of the Crimson King. Thinner than the robust Olympian wines, but exciting and full of interesting contradictions.

Much like the Crimson King himself.

He pulled his fur-lined cloak about himself, feeling cold in his flesh and weary to his bones. Of all the things Fulgrim had brought to this mission, Perturabo valued the gift of this cloak the highest. Its fabric was warm and the workmanship of the skull fastener inhumanly beautiful. The stone at its centre was polished smoother than even he might manage in a lapidary's workshop. It had been black with hair-fine golden threads when Fulgrim had first presented it to him, but was now a melange of gold and black, the former gradually becoming the dominant colour.

Perturabo turned the stone, letting it catch the light from the hovering lumen globes.

‘An inconstant thing,’ he said. ‘The perfect gift from my brother.’

Perturabo sighed and returned to the broken Warhound, picking up a timing lever and beginning to work the kinks out with a miniature hammer and laser measuring device.

The massed fleets of the Iron Warriors and Emperor’s Children still plied the tempestuous currents of the warp under the guidance of Karuchi Vohra, but their journey was almost over. The Trident were eager to be unleashed, to set their Grand Battalions to war once more.

A single warship with a competent Navigator could utilise the torrential currents of the warp, slingshotting from squall to squall to make best speed, but to attempt such manoeuvres with a large fleet was to invite disaster. Perturabo would not risk such impetuosity, not this deep in the Eye of Terror, where each storm and tempest was strong enough to tear ships apart in the blink of an eye.

The Paths Above were indeed a calm current through the warp, as Karuchi Vohra had promised, but to move so many ships through them took time.

He didn’t trust Vohra, just as he did not trust Fulgrim, but he could not say for sure what the guide’s true agenda might be. What could a lone eldar scholar – if that was his true vocation – hope to gain by deceiving them? Barban Falk had standing orders to put a bolt-round through the guide’s head at the first sign of betrayal, a task he was already hoping he would have to carry out.

And then there was the matter of the second ship he had glimpsed when the *Sisypheum* had inadvertently unmasked itself. None of the ship’s surveyor apparatus had registered it and none of the bridge crew had witnessed it, but Perturabo knew what he had seen.

Who else might be on the hunt for the Angel Exterminatus?

Imperial forces? Unlikely, for there was every indication that the second ship had been hiding from the *Sisypheum* as well. Perhaps Karuchi Vohra was not as alone as he claimed, or perhaps there were other races who knew of this mission and sought to thwart its success or profit by its achievement.

Further questions were put aside as a gentle chime sounded from the entrance to his sanctum. Perturabo answered without looking up.

‘Enter.’

The door opened and Forrix stood silhouetted in the stark glare of the vapour lights behind him. In his Terminator armour, he looked invincible.

‘My lord,’ said Forrix. ‘Pardon the intrusion.’

‘What is it, my triarch?’

‘The eldar says we have reached our destination.’

Perturabo waited until he had finished working on the timing lever, the laser telling him it was as straight as it ever would be. He put it and the hammer back in their proper places.

‘Have you been able to fix it, my lord?’ asked Forrix. ‘The Warhound, I mean.’

Perturabo stood with a groan of weariness, sudden pain lancing up his spine.

‘A handful of components amongst thousands,’ he said, rubbing his face. ‘There’s a lesson there somewhere, but I’m too tired to think of it.’

Perturabo had never seen a world like it.

Like a pearl set in a canvas left out in the rain, it was a pristine bauble in the miasma of boiling energies of the warp. Where other pockets of matter were storm-lashed hell-worlds of impossible physics and nightmarish pseudo-realities, this planet had somehow remained untouched, a point of light against a backcloth of impenetrable darkness.

‘Wonderful,’ said Fulgrim, his holographic form wavering and crazed with static. ‘It is a virgin in a bordello, a regimental mascot in a slaughterhouse.’

Fulgrim’s image was clad in battle-plate, the golden wing of his shoulder guard gleaming, even over the patchy holographic connection. There was no sign of the hurt he had suffered at Perturabo’s hands.

‘Does it have a name?’ asked Perturabo.

Karuchi Vohra stood beside the command lectern, with Barban Falk his constant shadow a pace behind him.

‘This region of space was once home to a world known as Iydris,’ said Vohra. ‘A world said to have been favoured by the goddess Lileath, but I do not know if this is the same place.’

‘And you’re sure this is where we’ll find the weapons?’ asked Forrix.

‘Of course he’s sure,’ snapped Fulgrim. ‘How many other worlds like this do you imagine there are?’

‘This is the place,’ said Vohra. ‘The sorrow I feel just from looking at it tells me so.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Kroeger.

‘This is a Crone World, a relic of my people’s long-vanished empire,’ said Vohra. ‘A race fell to ruin here, billions of souls lost forever. It is not easy for me to see this.’

Perturabo sensed falsehood in Vohra’s answer, but there was little to be done about it now. They were here, and there was work to be done. He turned to

address the hybrid machine shipmaster of the *Iron Blood*.

‘Captain Vort, give me a full surveyor sweep of the surrounding area,’ he commanded. ‘I want to know if there is anything else nearby.’

‘You think the Iron Hands might be here?’ asked Fulgrim.

‘Don’t you?’ he countered.

‘I think their vessel must surely have been too badly damaged after ramming the *Andronicus* to have survived much longer than my beautiful ship,’ said Fulgrim.

‘Then you’re forgetting how resourceful Ferrus’s sons are,’ said Perturabo. ‘They’ve taken enough punishment to cripple a capital vessel and are still flying. That ship’s as hard as Olympian bedrock, and it’s going to take more than a collision to put it out of the fight.’

‘Assuming you’re right, what can one ship do against our massed strength, brother? We have two entire Legion fleets, hundreds of vessels, tens of thousands of warriors.’

‘You heard what happened on Dwell?’

‘No,’ said Fulgrim.

‘You’re lying,’ said Perturabo. ‘And you should know better than to dismiss any warriors of the Iron Tenth.’

‘They died easily enough on Isstvan,’ sneered Fulgrim.

‘You have a short memory, brother,’ said Perturabo. ‘They died hard and they died fighting. And they’re here somewhere.’

Soft plainsong issued from the vox-grilles mounted on the ceiling. A melody without a tune and a wordless evocation of emotional intensity beyond understanding. The sound permeated every corner of the *Iron Blood*’s bridge, a lyrical note that jarred with the hard edges and uncompromising lines of the space. Even the soft binaric burr of the bridge data engines seemed to still themselves in the presence of the sound.

‘What is that?’ said Kroeger.

‘Background radiation and fluxing emissions from the planet,’ came the bark of the captain’s augmetic voice. ‘The auspex is interpreting it as a vox signal. Filtering it out now.’

‘Wait,’ said Perturabo. ‘Leave it.’

‘You hear it too?’ asked Fulgrim.

Perturabo nodded. ‘Yes. That’s not interference.’

He saw the confusion in the faces of his triarchs and said, ‘It’s a lament.’

‘And a warning,’ added Fulgrim. ‘I have heard the like of it before, around

Murder.’

‘A warning of what?’ said Forrix.

Perturabo shifted the focus of the viewscreen and what had been lost in the magnification of the pearlescent world was revealed.

The heart of the Eye of Terror, a gravitational hellstorm with a supermassive black hole at its centre. A sphere of polished onyx swirling with colours like oil smears, it was a sucking wound in the flesh of the galaxy that vomited unnatural matter into the void. Whatever cataclysm had brought the Eye of Terror into being, this was its epicentre. A dark doorway to an unknowable destination and an unimaginably powerful singularity whose gravity was so strong that it consumed light, matter, space and time in its destructive core.

‘How is that planet not being dragged in?’ wondered Forrix. ‘How are *we* not being dragged in?’

‘Legend says that Lileath was protective of her world and held it tight to her breast,’ said Karuchi Vohra. ‘Not even Morai-heg’s black hunger could wrench it from the firmament.’

‘That’s no answer,’ boomed Falk.

‘It is the only one I have,’ replied the eldar guide. ‘The Paths Above have brought us to Iydris in such a way that whatever force holds this world from destruction and keeps the ravages of the warp at bay keeps us safe too.’

‘Then we should be about our business before that changes,’ said Perturabo, switching the display on the viewscreen to a topological representation of the planet’s surface. ‘Where is the citadel of *Amon ny-shak Kaelis*? Show me.’

Karuchi Vohra nodded and zoomed in on the planet’s surface. There was no indication of the world’s climate or environment, nothing beyond its superficial geography, yet Perturabo instantly saw one unique feature of its form.

Fulgrim saw it too and said, ‘It’s a perfect sphere.’

‘What does the planet’s shape matter?’ asked Kroeger.

‘Such ideal geometry is virtually impossible in planetary formation,’ said Perturabo. ‘The push and pull of gravity from nearby stars and celestial phenomena stretches and compresses planets. Most are flattened ellipses, but this is perfectly spherical.’

‘What could have caused it?’ said Forrix.

‘I don’t know,’ said Perturabo. ‘Who truly understands the forces at work in the warp?’

‘There,’ said Karuchi Vohra, and a shimmering crust overlaid the smooth surface of Iydris, a hazed representation of soaring towers, grand palaces and

magnificent temples. As the composite image gathered information from the *Iron Blood*'s many surveyors, the spread of structures eventually covered the entire world.

A tomb world, its entire surface given over to mourning and remembrance of the dead, perhaps?

No, that wasn't right, but Perturabo couldn't grasp the true nature of this world.

'The Sepulchre of Isha's Doom sits at the centre of *Amon ny-shak Kaelis*,' said Vohra, pointing to a shimmering arrangement of geometric forms at what, on a Terran-standard world, would be the northern polar icecap. 'It stands astride the entrance to the prison tomb of the Angel Exterminatus.'

'How is it defended?' asked Perturabo.

'This maelstrom was said to be Asuryan's best defence against anyone finding the resting place of the Angel Exterminatus,' said Vohra. 'Though some legends speak of an army of immortals who stand sentinel upon the citadel's walls to watch over its weapons, but that is all I know.'

'Immortals?' said Kroeger. 'Robots, maybe?'

'Unlikely,' said Forrix.

'Then what?'

Perturabo ended their debate by jabbing a fist at the structure Karuchi Vohra had indicated.

'This is where we will break in,' he said. 'What are the rest of these structures? Why raise a world's worth of buildings if there's no one to put in them?'

'I do not know, my lord,' said Karuchi Vohra.

Once again, Perturabo felt the lie uncoil from the eldar, but Fulgrim spoke before he could understand the heart of it. 'What does it matter, brother? We will find out when we make planetfall. A little mystery is nothing to fear.'

Perturabo nodded to himself and folded his arms, feeling a chill seep into his bones at the sight of the dead planet before him. His entire body felt numb and his lungs burned with the effort of breathing.

He threw off the lethargy and said, 'Falk, I want everything around that sepulchre levelled. Leave an exclusion zone of three kilometres from its farthest edge, but everything beyond that for a hundred more is to be bombed flat.'

'What? No!' cried Fulgrim.

'This is my command,' said Perturabo. 'And I don't land a single warrior into a potentially hostile environment without a preliminary bombardment.'

'You might damage what's below!'

Perturabo took note of Fulgrim's phrasing and shook his head.

'Trust me,' he said, 'If there's one thing the Iron Warriors do better than anyone else, it's launching pinpoint barrages from orbit.'

The IV Legion fleet assumed bombardment formation over *Amon ny-shak Kaelis*, their barrage cannons, mass drivers and bomb bays loaded with surface-smashing ordnance, short-burn incendiaries and electromagnetic pulse-bomblets. Those ships assigned fire sectors closest to the citadel were loaded with lower-yield munitions, while those tasked with levelling the outer regions prepped the largest warheads. Volley-firing frigates jostled with heavier capital ships as they prepared to rain explosive fury upon the world below.

The Emperor's Children played no part in the bombardment preparations. Perturabo was unwilling to trust their fire discipline, and Fulgrim declined to bombard a world he had coveted for so long. Within an hour of the order's issue, the last assigned ship in the Iron Warriors fleet had assumed geostationary orbit around Iydris with its weapon bays and cannons ready to lay waste to the surface.

The fire command came a second later, and the heavens lit up with the collimated fire of a Space Marine Legion as it unleashed a controlled instant of lethality. One burst was all it took, one searing instant of precisely calculated fire.

Flash-burning lances struck first, igniting the atmosphere to eliminate the frictional drag on the following ordnance. Kinetic mass driver munitions hit next, slamming into the surface of the planet like the hammers of gods. Shockwaves spread out in radial sector patterns, sending tectonic blasts along mathematically precise vectors. Conventional warheads followed, pounding the earth in stepped barrages, marching outwards in repeating waves.

Incendiaries razed the target zone flat, vitrifying the rock and burning away whatever organic material might remain on the surface. A cone of fire gouged the surface of Iydris, burning, pounding and flattening in the blink of an eye structures that had stood inviolate for tens of thousands of years.

A barren ring of pulverised earth encircled the citadel of *Amon ny-shak Kaelis*, leaving its walls, towers and temples an isolated island cut off from the rest of the planet's structures by a billowing firestorm of planet-cracking force.

And in its wake came a blooming haze of iron and violet steel.

Flocks of Thunderhawks, Stormbirds, Warhawks and heavy planetary landers launched from crammed embarkation decks. Bulk tenders descended to low orbit

and disgorged thousands of troop carriers, armour lifters and supply barques. Titanic, gravity-cushioned mass-landers moved with majestic slowness as two battle engines of Legio Mortis took to the field, and this was but the first wave of the invasion.

Another eight would follow before the martial power of two entire Space Marine Legions and their auxiliary forces had made planetfall.

But Iydris was fighting back.

Forrix knew it was nonsense to think like that, but that was how it felt.

Most worlds did not welcome the presence of the Iron Warriors, for the IV Legion was known to bring ruin and bloodshed in its wake. Not for its legionaries the cheering crowds and floral-lined triumphal marches enjoyed by the likes of Guilliman's popinjays.

But this world seemed to be actively repelling them.

The blasted wasteland of ground zero was a glassy plain of powdered rubble and blackened fragments of some unknown material. What might once have been an area of awe-inspiring architecture from a bygone age of a fallen civilisation had been razed more thoroughly than any barbarian horde had ever left a city of Old Roma.

The landing zone was awash with thousands of armoured vehicles, supply camps, munition depots and fuel silos. Clouds of toxic fumes gathered overhead like looming thunderheads, from the armada of tracked fury ready to bear the Iron Warriors and Emperor's Children to the Sepulchre of Isha's Doom. Battalions of mobile artillery strained to be unleashed and hardened magazines of wall-shattering ordnance had already been built to service their insatiable hunger.

A great army awaited the order to attack, but its dropsite was yet to be declared secure.

Within minutes of the first Iron Warriors ship landing, Perturabo's Legion had begun the task of building fortifications to shelter the invading force and protect their chain of supply from orbit. Towers and walls were raised in the time it took to unload a single cargo bay, modular construction patterns, natural affinity and centuries of practice making the task as natural as breathing.

The Emperor's Children dropped in the wake of the Iron Warriors, their maddened carnival of lunatic mortals disgorging onto the surface of the planet in a panoply of shrieks, insanity and waving banners. Fulgrim's warriors followed their devotees onto the surface, basking in the adulation and forming up with a

rigour that had surprised Forrix.

Resplendent in their battle armour of gold and purple, iron and bronze, Fulgrim and Perturabo climbed to the peak of the first tower Forrix had built and took in the vista of the city-sized sepulchre they were to capture.

‘A city of the dead,’ Perturabo had remarked.

‘But one to recognise that there is beauty in death,’ Fulgrim had responded.

Forrix was forced to agree; the orbital augurs had failed utterly to capture the scale and drama of the place. Not even Fulgrim’s hyperbolic tale-telling in the Thaliakron had come close to the sheer immensity of the eldar tomb city.

With relentless inevitability, the Iron Warriors were fortifying the landing zone, but where the rock of Hydra Cordatus had welcomed the blades of their picks and augers like a lover, this world rejected them. It resisted their giant digging machines, it mocked their leviathan earth-movers and not a stone was laid that didn’t have to be reinforced beyond all expectations.

Three hours in-theatre and the initial contravallations were still unfinished.

Forrix was livid, loudly berating the Pneumachina, his underlings and his sapper crews, but there was little to be done. High, spike-topped walls were stretching around the vast acreage of the deployment zone, much slower than Forrix had ever known, but lengthening with every passing minute.

Forrix moved down the line of this newest segment, the heaving, belching, grinding engines of the Pneumachina like colossally industrious worker ants pasting together a hive for their queen from sheet metal, liquid permacrete, high-tensile rebars and ultra-dense hardcore. Walls like this could take a hit from a starship's macro-cannon and remain standing. Blockhouses, barracks and strongpoints were worked into the fabric of the walls, and battalions of Selucid Thorakite were already occupying them.

Dust from the orbital bombardment hung in the air like granular mist, hazing the strange light in the sky. From orbit, the planet's environment had appeared serene, but from the ground, it was anything but. A keening wail filled the air, like a plaintive cry at the threshold of hearing; some strange side effect of the bombardment or a lingering echo of some local phenomenon. Either way, it was a disquieting sound, part lament, part hostile curse. Strange colours swirled in the choked sky, a ceiling of pus yellow, spinning matter ejections of bruised purple and red, and vomited froths of bilious green.

All lit by the noctilucent glow from *Amon ny-shak Kaelis*.

The lambent emerald light seeped into the sky from beyond the wall, as though the stone of the distant sepulchre were irradiated. It oozed over the landscape, sluggish and lethargic, bathing the invasion forces in a poisonous green glow.

Forrix's dislike for this place was only getting worse.

He watched scurrying riveter-slaves following in the wake of a towering, smoke-belching machine that swallowed debris and excreted pre-formed blocks of hardened stone, enjoying the repetitive rhythm of their work. The engine's hydraulic jaws crushed gathered stone and its piston-driven hammers pounded the blocks into shape, ready for its rear-mounted lifter gear to haul into place. Forrix knelt to examine where the shaped stone met the ground, seeing a web of hair-fine cracks spreading from the sloped base. Already the walls needed strengthening and he shook his head in disbelief.

The Pneumachina engines had moved on, an implacable process of construction that was much slower than he demanded, but which was still unstoppable. Forrix reached a set of ironwork stairs bolted to the walls and climbed their scissoring height to the ramparts, emerging onto a covered walkway of overhanging kinetic hoardings, murder holes and grenade dumpers. Designed to secure a landing site or prevent an enemy force from relieving a besieged city, the walls were square-edged and hard-lined, the very antithesis of

this world's organic architecture.

All around the landing zone, the vast bomb-razed plain stretched to the horizon in all directions, an exclusion zone made secure by the orbital bombardment. Nothing moved on this flattened wasteland. Only glittering reflections and drifting banks of smoke broke the uniform emptiness.

Despite the bleakness of the landscape, Forrix could not escape the feeling of being watched, as though a host of unseen observers were studying him, assessing him and determining his worth. Forrix shook off the sensation and stalked the ramparts. Iron Warriors from the 134th Grand Battalion and the Thorakites manned the walls. The officers gave him nods of respect as he passed. Forrix crossed the rampart, staring at the distant city he and his fellow warriors were to put asunder.

It was a city of elegantly proportioned towers with fluted leaf-domes, sweeping walls that were gracefully defensible and arcing bridges of such slender dimensions that it must surely be impossible they could bear any weight. The city was alive with temples of gilded roofs, sepulchres that celebrated the lives of those interred beneath, and mausolea of such grand scale that only an emperor would be worthy to lie within.

The city was haloed on the far horizon by a disc of monstrous blackness, the terrifying black sun that lay at the heart of the Eye of Terror. It was an emerald city in the shadow of a nightmarish power that could devour it with a single inhalation.

Yet for all the city's beauty, there was no mistaking its hollow emptiness.

Nothing lived here. Nothing had ever lived here, nor ever would.

The Stonewrought had said it best when he stepped from the belly of a Stormbird.

Placing one palm on the ground, Vull Bronn had shaken his head and said, 'This world is dead, it has no soul. The rock will not stand.'

Overly poetic perhaps, but for once Forrix knew exactly what the Stonewrought meant.

Three kilometres farther along the wall, Barban Falk stared at the rising section of bastion before him, his breath coming in short, wheezing hikes. The same grinning skull-face he'd seen on the bridge of the *Iron Blood* was leering back at him from the cracks in the crumbling stonework of a toothed merlon that had fallen from the battlements.

'No,' he hissed. 'I am not seeing this.'

Denial, a keening voice in his head seemed to laugh. *How unoriginal…*

Falk shook his head and tore his gaze from the phantom image, striding down the length of the construction and forcing his mind to concentrate on the details of his Grand Battalion's work. Fresh sections of wall were being lifted in by enormous crane-engines under the supervision of his warriors and beaten into place by titanic siege robots with hammers the size of Land Raiders.

Falk felt an insistent tugging on the frayed edges of his mind – a wheedling, insistent pressure carried on the sighing cries of the wind that compelled him to pause and stare at the newest section of wall like a malfunctioning servitor. At first he saw nothing out of the ordinary, but then the arrangement of stress lines, runnels of permacrete and hissing rivets at the base of the wall seemed to cohere into that familiar deathly face, as though skilfully placed there by an artist who desired an audience of one. He blinked and the image was gone, but no sooner had he turned away than he saw it billowing in a dust cloud, shaped by an arc of the Pneumachina's crane limbs or formed in a scattering of superfluous offcuts. Falk shut his eyes, letting the image of the grotesque skull fall from his mind, even as he heard it scratching at his thoughts, like an animal left out in the dark.

He released a shuddering breath, and forced himself to look back at the work as it progressed. The grinning, fleshless face met his gaze and this time there was no mistaking the voice in his head.

Barban Falk, it said. *A name for he who will be nameless.*

Kroeger hated this world like he had hated no other.

The shimmering green glow from the distant sepulchre tainted everything with a sickly illumination, fraying Kroeger's already short temper. Since making planetfall, nothing had gone as planned. Machines had failed, stone had crumbled and metal had warped beyond usable tolerances.

He bit back an angry curse as yet another portion of the wall footings sank into the rock, leaving the split line flush with the surface. Dust billowed from the sunken blocks, necessitating yet another halt in the work as heavy lifter machines with bright carapaces and fluttering cog banners rolled in on wide tracks to haul them from the ground.

Gangs of robotic and cybernetic slaves dragged long bars of rust-coloured steel to add yet more reinforcement to the foundation trench.

'Another delay this campaign can ill afford,' said Harkor with a weary resignation Kroeger only half believed.

'I know,' he snapped in reply. 'My first war action as triarch and I'm behind in

every element of our projected advance. Might as well have myself buried in the foundations.'

Harkor held out a data-slate with crawling lines of progress reports.

'Every other warsmith is encountering similar delays.'

'I don't care about them,' said Kroeger. 'All I care about is that *I'm* on schedule. The sooner this work is complete, the sooner we can attack that cursed sepulchre and get off this world.'

The growling roars of the construction engines cleared Kroeger's thoughts as a cloud of filthy blue oilsmoke enveloped them. Cursing, he moved clear, hearing the grinding crack of splitting stone as the earth-moving leviathans fought to remove the subsided blocks from ground that now seemed to want to grip them tightly.

'Some strong words with the Pneumachina might speed things up,' suggested Harkor.

'My thoughts exactly,' said Kroeger, pushing through the silent ranks of servitors as a block was wrenched from the ground and broke apart in a cascade of crumbling fragments.

The servitors ignored him, and Kroeger saw a trio of black-robed magi arguing in crackling binary at the edge of a rubble-filled trench that was supposed to be heavy with foundation stones. Multiple holographic images of ground-penetrating auspex readings haloed one of the priests, and Kroeger felt his anger focus on this inhuman hybrid.

The magos waved multiple augmetic arms as he directed the work of whipped slave gangs with blurts of binaric nonsense. Before Kroeger even knew it, his sword was in his hand, his thumb pressing the activation stud.

One economical swing and the machine priest fell to the ground, hacked down from shoulder to groin. A squealing roar of machine pain erupted from his augmitters, which was swiftly silenced as the organic components of the priest collapsed in a clatter of metal and a wash of oily blood.

The remaining Pneumachina priests retreated from the sudden death of their leader, barking furious scraps of machine code. Kroeger put a bolt-round through the gleaming, half-flesh, half-iron skull of the nearest and brought the smoking barrel to bear on the last hooded priest.

The Pneumachina's agent balked at Kroeger's rage and loosed a burst of panicked binary.

Kroeger eased the hammer back on his pistol.

'Gothic,' he said. 'Do you speak it?'

The priest nodded and Kroeger heard a series of wetly metallic clicks as whatever passed for vocal chords were rearranged beneath its hood.

‘I do, warsmith,’ said the priest. ‘Enhancement: as did my compatriots.’

‘I’m sure they did, but they’re both dead and now you’re in charge of this wall’s construction,’ said Kroeger. ‘So tell me, what’s the damn hold-up?’

‘You understand the difficulties we face?’ asked the priest.

‘I do,’ said Kroger. ‘And I don’t care, just get this bastard wall built.’

The priest pressed on, resigned to or uncaring of Kroeger’s volatile temper. ‘Clarification: then you must also be aware that this ground is not conforming to any known model of geological dynamics in the Martian records. Its measured strength is not matching up to the reality of our build parameters.’

‘Here’s some clarification for you,’ said Kroeger, pulling the trigger.

Harkor knelt beside the corpses and flipped back the hood of the last priest. Nothing was left of the man’s face, only a snake’s nest of cables twitching from the ragged stump of neck. Pumping squirts of black, bio-organic fluid spilled into the trench. The stink was all chemicals and spoiled meat.

‘Those were some strong words,’ said Harkor.

‘Get me some more Pneumachina priests,’ snapped Kroeger. ‘Ones that know how to build a damn foundation.’

Kroeger turned on his heel.

NINETEEN

Amon ny-shak Kaelis

Disharmony

Someone I Want to Kill

The assault began five hours later, despite the full circuit of fortifications still being incomplete. The landing zone was almost surrounded, but the encircling walls had yet to meet one another. Layered rings of minefields and acres of razorwire spread from the outer faces of the walls, making the approach next to impossible for anyone without detailed maps and temporary dormancy codes.

Leaving Toramino and five thousand Iron Warriors to oversee the completion of the works and establish battery positions for the guns of the Stor-bezashk, Perturabo climbed to the cupola of a converted Shadowsword, one with additional armour plating to all sides and extended command and control functions. To accommodate the Lord of Iron's scale and his automaton bodyguards, the vehicle's superstructure and engine had been radically overhauled by the Pneumachina. Its main weapons were enhanced, and no more effective a killing machine existed in the Legion's vehicle pool.

Perturabo gave his transports no names, but the Iron Warriors knew it as *Tormentor*.

Normally he did not hold with the theatrics of riding into battle in a vehicle's cupola, but as this army's commander, sometimes a little theatre was not to be forgone.

Perturabo lifted *Forgebreaker* from his shoulders and held it high enough for all to see.

'Take the iron within!' he roared, sweeping the weapon down.

The Shadowsword's engine roared with a thunderclap of combustion, and a belching, toxin-laden cloud billowed in its wake as *Tormentor* rumbled forwards, crushing the rocky ground beneath its three-hundred-tonne weight.

The engines of a thousand Rhinos roared as they moved off with a thrumming

bass note that cracked the foundations of the walls around the landing zone. The very air shook with the reverberating sound, and a fog of exhaust smoke drifted over the planet's surface. Alongside the Rhinos came entire squadrons of Land Raiders, Predators, Whirlwinds and the strange, agglomerated vehicles of the Pneumachina: claw-armed walkers, stalking tanks with underslung weapon pods, flame spheres, wrecking machines and others whose purpose was not so easily divined.

The two Battle Titans of Legio Mortis marched with the Iron Warriors, Reavers both, and engine killers of their former brothers. *Mortis Vult* and *Malum Benedictio* had fought through the viral hellstorm of Isstvan III and both bore newly crafted kill banners depicting those Legions that had once fought as their brothers.

The Iron Warriors had come in force and the Emperor's Children no less so.

Scouting III Legion jetbikes zipped through the air above and in front of Perturabo's war ensemble, pink-skinned darts that probed the ground before the army's advance. Perturabo's lip curled in distaste at Fulgrim's riotous assembly of armour and infantry, a pageant of armoured vehicles at play. Like Perturabo, Fulgrim rode at the head of his army, a warrior god in impossibly bright armour. His brother might have ceded control of this mission to him, but Fulgrim was making sure he was still its figurehead. With his golden sword held out before him like a knightly lance, an outside observer could be forgiven for mistaking Fulgrim for the leader of this host.

Perturabo's gaze was drawn to the lunatic mortals following Fulgrim's warriors. The carnivalia of madness that attended the Emperor's Children's arrival on Hydra Cordatus was in full force. Skirling music drifted from its heaving mass and hundreds of vividly patterned banners fluttered and snapped in the riptide thermals of engine heat.

Throughout the history of war, armies had been attended by all manner of hangers-on: suppliers, smiths, butchers, whores, ostlers, families, bakers, launderers, surgeons, tailors and a hundred more professions, but they were traditionally left in the rear when battle was joined.

Fulgrim, it seemed, intended to bring his army's followers to the heart of the battle.

Tormentor travelled the distance between the landing zone and the isolated sepulchre quickly and implacably, grinding the rubble of pulverised tombs beneath its tracks as it approached what crumbling ruins the orbital barrage had

left standing. The shell-cratered emptiness gave way to occasional stumps of walls, lone facades and brittle exoskeletons of structures that looked more like pollarded trees than anything built from component materials.

Thermal-tugged dust clouds slipped through the shattered buildings and the keening cries that drifted on the air were amplified by the ruins. The advance slowed as the driver picked a path through the outer elements of the sprawling citadel. Lower-yield munitions had been employed closer to the citadel, and areas of this outer region of impact had been left more or less unscathed. *Tormentor* smashed it all aside, the vehicle's heavy prow bludgeoning an unwavering path towards the point where orbital surveyor feeds had identified a number of entrances in the citadel's wall.

Perturabo kept a constant data feed open between his visor's display and the super-heavy tank's auspex suite. Low-grade interference was fogging much of the returns, but what he was seeing did not worry him unduly. The ruins were empty of life – no hidden graviton traps, no sniping rocket teams and no buried minefields to blow a track.

For all intents and purposes, the route into the citadel of *Amon ny-shak Kaelis* was undefended and their route unopposed. An axiom of war that Corax was fond of repeating was that it wasn't the enemy you saw that killed you, it was the enemy you *didn't* see, and Perturabo couldn't quite believe that a world of such obvious importance to the eldar had been so comprehensively abandoned. Snares and delusions to deter the unwary were all very well, but were no substitute for warriors with guns, who knew how to use them.

Even the impenetrable *Cavea Ferrum* was typically surrounded by thousands of legionaries.

Perturabo opened a helm pict-link to Fulgrim, and a shimmering holographic representation of his brother appeared floating in the air before him, suspended above the armoured glacis of the Shadowsword.

'Exhilarating, is it not?' laughed Fulgrim, his dark eyes wide with anticipation and his moon-pale hair pixelated behind him.

'I don't like it,' said Perturabo. 'It's too easy.'

Fulgrim looked irritated at having his ebullience punctured. 'We are on the verge of achieving what we set out to do, brother. Why must you spoil this moment for me?'

'Because when the tactical situation's too good to be true, it's usually a sign you're about to get hit harder than you ever thought possible.'

Fulgrim shook his head and said, 'Be maudlin if you must, brother. I will

enjoy this moment of sweet success.’

‘This place is empty, its walls undefended,’ said Perturabo, twisting to look around as the density of structures became greater. ‘You must have known that.’

‘I suspected it might be the case,’ admitted Fulgrim.

‘Then why did we not simply launch our assault straight into the heart of the citadel on the wings of Stormbirds and drop pods?’ growled Perturabo, angry at this latest revelation.

‘Because it might *not* have been the case,’ said Fulgrim. ‘Besides, I didn’t want to deny you the chance to build some of your grand fortresses. To plant the flag, so to speak.’

‘You didn’t need me here,’ said Perturabo. ‘Nor my Legion.’

‘On the contrary, I’d say it’s always better to have a siege master nearby and not need him, than to need him and not have him.’

Fulgrim smiled, but there was predatory malice to it. ‘Trust me, Perturabo, I cannot do this without you. I will need you at my side before this is done, brother dearest.’

Fulgrim’s words sent a dark chill down Perturabo’s spine, but everything Fulgrim said these days was loaded with hidden meaning and secret poisons. Nothing his brother said could be taken at face value, but whatever barb these words contained would need to wait.

The buildings *Tormentor* passed were those on the very edge of the bombardment’s outer area of effect, and which had retained much of their former character. White-gold towers of a strange lucite material soared overhead, reflecting the spectral illumination that emanated from the city itself. Perhaps these had once been an inner precinct of the citadel, a grand approach to its magnificence. Now they were its outer edges, tombs and buildings of unknown purpose that possessed a grace and harmony Perturabo found beguiling.

Even in his most unfettered flourishes of design, when he had relaxed his obsession with straight lines, he had never known such fluid grace in his architecture. A sudden guilt touched Perturabo at this wanton destruction, and the image of burning Olympian towns and cities, the burned-meat smell of the world-pyres, and the ashen taste of loss returned to him with a powerful jolt.

‘Brother?’ said the holographic Fulgrim.

Perturabo shook off the disorientating memory as the ground opened up into a wide circuit passing around the outer walls of the citadel. Soaring hundreds of metres into the air, the citadel’s walls were smooth and unblemished, like the face of a beloved gem polished by a skilled gemsmith.

It was from these walls and the structures within that the greenish glow emanated, a soft radiance that somehow managed to illuminate an impossible world. Wondrously shaped towers rose from the battlements, looking more like organic growths of coral than anything formed by the craft of an artificer. A multitude of wide gateways led within, tall and leaf-shaped, their outer edges carved with alien letterforms. It seemed ludicrous to build such high walls only to pierce them with so many entrances.

‘There aren’t even any gates,’ he said, aiming *Tormentor* towards the nearest opening.

‘You sound disappointed,’ replied Fulgrim.

‘Not disappointed,’ answered Perturabo, watching the smooth battlements for any sign of a mythical army of immortals appearing above him. ‘Just suspicious.’

Tormentor passed beneath the archway and Perturabo felt a shiver of scrutiny, like the tingling sensation of a medical auspex or a biometric analyser as it penetrated flesh and bone. The feeling of being watched that he had experienced since landing increased, as though a hidden, glacially slow sentience at the heart of this world had only now become aware of their intrusion. Though tactical prudence and natural inclination urged Perturabo to keep pushing deeper into the citadel, he brought *Tormentor* to a halt three hundred metres inside the wall.

He climbed down from the high cupola, dropping to the ground in front of his growling Shadowsword, letting the funereal character of the interior wash over him. The Iron Circle disembarked from widened crew doors on the super-heavy tank’s side, forming a shieldwall around him.

Perturabo ignored them and craned his neck to examine the coffered panels on the upper pediments of the nearby sepulchres. Each was filled with emerald-lit murals of weeping maidens and hooded reapers. Vibrant frescoes and mosaics adorned the lower reaches of every facade, depicting the dead in the passage of their life; arms aloft in unbounded joy before being plunged into all-consuming despair in an endlessly repeating cycle.

Perturabo saw no two alike, and marvelled to see such love and care lavished upon those who would never know of it. Thousands of glittering oval gemstones of ocean green, sky blue and blood-drop red were inset on every mural: some as the necklaces and brooches of the immortalised dead, some as allegorical representations of hearts and souls.

The spaces between the mourn-towers, mausolea and sepulchres were wide, more akin to open plazas dividing grand civic structures than streets, making the

city feel open and airy, like a wide park filled with sculptural architecture. Yet there was an oppressiveness that made Perturabo feel as though the buildings were pressing inwards like the crushing walls of a compactor.

The sense of being watched was stronger than ever.

The Iron Circle parted to allow the Trident through as Perturabo's attention turned to the slender-limbed statues of bulbous-headed constructs on plinths that lined the spaces between each building. Taller than a Contemptor Dreadnought, but without the obvious bulk and power of such war machines, they were exquisite carvings, fashioned from an opaque crystal. Wing-like spines flared from their shoulders, and winking gemstones glittered deep in the centre of their elongated helm-skulls. Thousands of these statues lined the avenues and processionals of the city, silent observers to this violation of its inner precincts.

'The army of immortals?' wondered Forrix, following Perturabo's gaze.

'If so, then they are a poor choice of guardian for this place.'

Perturabo once again felt that cyclopean presence within the citadel, like a colossus that only now took notice of the ants swarming at its feet.

'My lord,' said Barban Falk. 'Should we press on?'

'No,' said Perturabo. 'We dig in.'

The Iron Warriors complement of Rhinos divided into three sections. The first formed a laagered bridgehead within the citadel, while the second created a cordon around the ingress points. Each of the IV Legion's Rhinos was a specially converted Castellan variant, a design of Perturabo's, with unfolding armour plates and impact bracing that turned them into miniature bunkers. The modular construction allowed the Rhinos to be linked together in a chain, forming a makeshift fortified line when materials for more permanent emplacements were unavailable or a defence had to be fashioned quickly.

Four hundred Rhinos assumed a perfect formation outside the walls in a layered barbican protecting the Legions' line of retreat, while inside, an identical number of vehicles mirrored them. With the perforated citadel walls dividing them, the Rhinos became a fortified bunker complex from which to launch operations within the citadel. Another three thousand Iron Warriors and Emperor's Children would hold this smaller fortification.

Perturabo broke the final section down still further into three smaller forces, giving command of each to one of his triarchs. Kroeger would take the left thrust, Falk the right, while he and Forrix advanced along the centre. Each blade of the Trident's advance was comprised of around three thousand Iron Warriors,

with thirty Rhinos, ten Predator tanks, four Land Raiders and assorted mobile artillery support. Warsmith Berossus led the Legion's thuggish Dreadnoughts through the wall and attached himself to the centre, spreading his war machines throughout each blade of the Trident. Both Titans of the Legio Mortis marched straight up the middle, a pair of towering war gods walking in escort of the primarch himself. The colossal battle engines loosed braying war shouts that echoed from the buildings and shook their very foundations. Mortis came not in the shadows, not in ambush, but loudly and with malice in their hearts. The enemy would know they were coming, and that fear would only grow with each titanic footfall that brought the war engines closer.

Each force was a concentration of martial power that could bring a world to heel by itself, its fighting strength far in excess of what would be required to capture this place. Perturabo was taking no chances; if events unfolded as he suspected, he wanted overwhelming power ready to respond in an instant.

Fulgrim's host broke apart into individual warbands, ranging in size from around a hundred warriors to groups of nearly a thousand. Each of these autonomous groups appeared to be led by a captain, though such was the bizarre ornamentation and embellishment on each warrior's armour, it was often impossible to discern specific rankings. Though far from standard Legion doctrine, the III Legion's warriors at least retained a measure of their former adherence to a chain of command as they spread out and attached themselves to one of the three prongs of the Trident. Lastly came a long convoy of cargo-20s, sixty heavily laden and high-sided container haulers with their bellies riding close to the ground. Normally used to ferry the vast quantities of ammunition required by mobile artillery regiments, they were guarded by warriors in Terminator armour and a host of Dreadnoughts.

'What are you planning, brother?' wondered Perturabo, keeping his voice low.

Fulgrim looked over and gave Perturabo an expansive bow, his cloak flaring out behind him like the golden wings of the mythical beast to which he had always likened himself. Karuchi Vohra stood in Fulgrim's shadow, attended by two of his brother's Phoenix Guard. The eldar's face was gloating, but pinched tight with wary hostility, as though the citadel's interior simultaneously entranced and terrified him.

Perturabo decided that when they were done with this place he would kill the alien.

'Give the word, brother,' said Fulgrim, the feral smile and indulgent tone making it sound as though this was a gesture of magnanimity on his part.

Perturabo nodded and a howling cheer erupted from the throats of the Emperor's Children as hundreds of vehicle engines roared to life.

His triarchs turned away to rejoin their warriors, but Perturabo stopped them.

'Be watchful,' he said, stealing a sidelong glance at the Emperor's Children. 'For anything.'

Forrix nodded in understanding. 'Iron within,' he said.

'Iron without,' answered Perturabo, and leaving the fortified bridgehead behind, he led the Iron Warriors and Emperor's Children into the heart of *Amon ny-shak Kaelis*.

Lucius jogged alongside the growling Rhinos as they prowled through the plaza-streets of the citadel, irritated there was no sign of any enemy. The shimmering green light of the city illuminated well enough, but there was no life to it. One curious fact he noticed was that it reflected from nothing, no matter how polished and clear it might be. The blade of his sword showed not the slightest green tint in the gleaming silver.

Warriors of the III Legion moved in a rabble, each warband finding its own pace; some dawdling, some pushing ahead of the vehicles. Jetbikes shot overhead, weaving complex patterns through the air and sometimes flashing so close he could have beheaded the pilot had he so wished.

The dour Iron Warriors formed the centre of the advance, their combined force ridiculously overpowered for such a ludicrously easy task. This element of the assault was led by Barban Falk, one of Perturabo's inner circle, and Lucius passed a few idle moments working out the man's balance, reach and strength.

In case this fragile alliance should crack, he thought with delicious amusement.

Falk was a giant, even allowing for the layered bulk of Cataphractii plate, who seemed to be looking for something, judging by the way his head was darting around from place to place. Lucius saw hesitancy in the warrior, a wariness that was keeping him from matching the pace of the other two thrusts.

Lucius wondered what Falk was seeing, filing this latest fragment of information away. Lucius knew his blade would struggle to penetrate Falk's armour, but even with that advantage the Iron Warrior wouldn't be fast enough to get his tearing gauntlets upon Lucius. The swordsman flexed his fingers over the whip he'd taken from dead Kalimos. The textured grip was fashioned from the outer skin of a deep sea cephalopod, and micro-hooks extruded from every square millimetre of its surface, making it wondrously intense to crack.

Lucius tore his thoughts from the murder of Barban Falk to the statues lining the wide streets. Letting the armoured column slowly rumble past him, Lucius jogged over to a nearby sepulchre, drinking in the bright colours and vibrant texture of the mosaics rendered on its surface.

The figures were, for the most part, a mix of artists, sculptors, singers, acrobats and other creative types, but what seemed like a disproportionate amount were also warriors. Some made war with long pikes that spat fire, others wore screaming masks, while still others fought with twin blades. Lucius liked the grace and poise of these warriors and followed the movements of the sword-wielding eldar, adopting their poses and fighting stances as he leapt and danced, with his blade spinning a web of silver steel around his body.

Lucius grunted, moving faster and faster, each twist of his body and flickering blow a blur of pinkish-purple plate and glistening blade edge.

He spun around the statues lining the road, revelling in the rapturous glances he was receiving from his Legion brothers and those of grudging admiration from the Iron Warriors. Lucius slalomed down the length of the mausoleum, weaving a path between the crystalline statues. As he approached the end of the structure, he leapt into the air and cracked the barbed whip. The toothed length wrapped around the neck of the statue at the corner of the building and sliced cleanly through its glittering neck.

As the head fell, Lucius's sword licked out and cut through its centre. The two halves fell to the ground and exploded into gleaming shards of glass. He dropped lightly from his spinning decapitation, blade angled up behind his body and whip twitching on the ground.

Lonomia Ruen detached himself from the advance, and Lucius cursed. Since the death of Bastarnae Abranxe, Ruen had transferred his cultish adoration to Lucius. For a while it had been an interesting diversion to have a slavish devotee, but Lucius was already tiring of the man's desperate need.

'Your body is a wonder,' said Ruen.

Sycophancy was always welcome, but Lucius preferred his flunkies to have sense enough to keep their distance. Ruen remained blissfully unaware of his status as a supreme irritant, and had become Lucius's newly acquired shadow.

'Learning anything new?' asked Ruen.

'Only that eldar fighting styles don't suit me,' Lucius said, coiling the whip with a twist of the wrist and hooking it on his belt.

'Looked good from where I was standing,' pointed out Ruen.

'Because you barely know one end of a sword from the other,' snapped

Lucius, sheathing his sword. ‘Did Abranxe teach you nothing of their use?’

Ruen’s posture stiffened, and Lucius grinned, wondering if he would go for one of his envenomed blades.

‘Abranxe was a master swordsman, but he was no instructor,’ allowed Ruen, his survival instinct restraining his sense of hurt outrage. ‘Tell me then, why is the eldar way of the blade no use to you?’

‘The postures are intended for the lightweight physiques of the eldar and their skinny bodies,’ said Lucius, in a rare moment of indulgence. ‘It’s no use to a Space Marine. Fast as we are, we’ll never be as fast as them.’

‘You could be. Some day.’

‘Don’t be foolish, Ruen,’ said Lucius, though the sincerity of the flattery touched him despite his best efforts to remain aloof.

A warrior detached himself from the advancing column of armoured vehicles and artillery moving through the city streets, a bulky, asymmetrical warrior with a long, pole-armed axe weapon that boomed and skirled with shrieking harmonics. Marius Vairosean came with a group of similarly armed warriors, and Lucius felt his teeth rattling in his skull at the approach of the Kakophoni. Even with the majority of their sonic cannons sheathed, each warrior acted as a conduit for constant, nerve-jangling wails.

Vairosean’s bare head was a mass of fresh surgical scars where resonating amplification devices had been worked into the reshaped bone of his skull. His eyes were maddened black orbs submerged in pallid, doughy flesh, the skin flaking and veined with ruptured blood vessels.

‘Keep moving,’ said the master of the Kakophoni, and the pitch of his words sent a spasm of pain through Lucius. Vairosean’s stretched mouth formed words with difficulty, and expanding flesh sacs at his neck moved in time with his breathing. Every one of the Kakophoni were implanted with organic echo chambers in their necks and chests to enhance the nerve-paralysing effect of their sonic bellows.

‘Just admiring the architecture,’ said Lucius, bending to lift the smooth ruby stone lying amid the shattered remains of the head he had cut from the statue. It felt warm in his hand, and he laughed as he sensed panic emanating from within, as though the stone were afraid.

The sonic cannon on Vairosean’s back gave a barking howl, and the weapons of his men squealed and shrieked in syncopation. Lucius gave the stone a squeeze, grinning as its panic crystallised into terror.

‘What is that?’ demanded Vairosean, holding out his hand.

Lucius shrugged and placed the stone in Vairosean's upturned palm.

The stone vibrated as though dissonant harmonics were passing through it, dancing on Variosean's hand like a polarity-shifting magnet. With a sharp *crack*, the stone split in two and Lucius gasped as he felt a sudden jolt of energy slam into his body, as if a shot of the most incredible battle stimm had just been dumped into his system. He knew Vairosean felt it too, his face twisted in rapt bliss. The weapons of the Kakophoni blared with deafening power and half a dozen nearby statues burst apart as though attacked by invisible sledgehammers.

Reduced to powdered shards no larger than a fingernail, each fragmented statue bore a similar gemstone at its heart, and the shrieking Kakophoni wasted no time in falling upon them. They fought one another for the heart stones, clawing and barging one another as they snatched up the warmly glowing gems. No sooner had each stone been grasped than it exploded and sent billowing surges of blood-boiling ecstasy through every warrior close enough to feel it. Their weapons brayed and honked and let out shrieking howls of atavistic pleasure, filling the streets with atonal echoes that bounced from tomb to crypt like bloodhounds in search of prey.

Lucius backed away from Vairosean as the warrior unslung his poleaxe, its long haft enveloped in flickering blue light and its body thrumming with power. Vairosean slammed his hand down upon it, and a blazing whipcrack of lightning-wreathed noise pounded the air with ferocious disharmony. The facade of the tomb split open and a bomb-blast shockwave punched a ten-metre-wide crater in the road.

Awareness of the gemstones' bounty spread through the Emperor's Children like an infection. And what had begun as a ragged but relentless advance devolved into a raging free-for-all as every statue within reach was torn down and smashed apart in an orgy of destruction.

Barban Falk's Iron Warriors pressed on, leaving the Emperor's Children behind.

Nykona Sharrowkyn watched the riot spread to encompass the entire Emperor's Children component of the traitor advance on this axis. Statues were smashed apart and the stones within them crushed underfoot, swallowed whole or placed within freshly cut, self-inflicted wounds. The screams were orgiastic, their actions inexplicable.

'What new lunacy is this?' wondered Sabik Wayland, shaking his head in disbelief.

‘Ever since Isstvan and the attack on the *Sisypheum* I’ve given up trying to rationalise the motivations of traitors,’ answered Sharrowkyn.

‘What happened to “know your enemy”?’

‘I’m coming to understand that’s not always sound advice,’ said Sharrowkyn slowly. ‘To know the Emperor’s Children would be to invite a terrible madness into your soul.’

‘You’ll get no argument from me on that,’ agreed Wayland as Sharrowkyn leaned out over the parapet of the strangely glowing sepulchre upon which they perched. Wayland had climbed hand over hand to reach this place, where Sharrowkyn had used his heavily modified jump pack. Its cross-section was less than half that of an Assault Marine’s standard equipment, and its emissions were almost invisible unless you were looking right at it.

Two hundred metres below them, the Emperor’s Children clawed and tore at each other as they fought for possession of the warmly glowing stones within each of the crystal statues. Sharrowkyn had no idea what inherent quality they possessed that had triggered such destructive behaviour, but even he felt the terrible sadness that accompanied each one’s destruction.

The Iron Warriors ignored the antics of their brethren, advancing deeper into the city. Sharrowkyn didn’t blame them. Better to have no allies than ones you couldn’t count on.

At least Sharrowkyn could count on the Iron Hands. He had fought beside a great many of his brother legionaries, but he held none in such esteem as the fatherless sons of Ferrus. A hundred and forty-six warriors of the X Legion were concealed in the shadows around the citadel’s central mausoleum-temple, the obvious focus of the traitors. Their deployment, advance and formation only confirmed that they were heading straight for the battered warriors of Ulrach Branthan.

Sharrowkyn had known where the Iron Warriors would make their ingress, and brought the Iron Hands in on the opposite trajectory once the dust had settled from the bombardment. Cadmus Tyro led the incursion force, with the veterans of Vermana Cybus spread through the Iron Hands like structural pins in a weakened facade. Cybus had more or less recovered from his encounter with Perturabo. The crushed mechanised portions of his anatomy had been replaced with fresh augmetics cannibalised from the *Sisypheum* and those organic parts that couldn’t be fully restored were coated with synth-skin and implanted plasteks.

Yet more of his humanity sacrificed in the fight against the Warmaster.

The *Sisypheum* remained in low orbit; as close as the heavily damaged ship dared. Her encounter with the *Andronicus* had left her broken and torn, but like the Legion she served, the *Sisypheum* would endure. She was pulled in tight to the planet, skimming the zones of interference between atmospheric layers to avoid detection. She was close, but still far too distant if they were detected. Only Frater Thamatica and Atesh Tarsa remained aboard, one as a punishment, the other as a guardian. The Stormbirds and Thunderhawks that had brought them to the surface sat atop sepulchres deeper into the city, clustered on rooftops like raptors waiting patiently in their eyries.

It was beyond foolish to be here.

Yes, Raven Guard squads were frequently outnumbered when they operated behind enemy lines, but this was ridiculous. Tens of thousands of Iron Warriors and Emperor's Children were drawing near a group of warriors who couldn't hope to fight them off. Odds of a thousand to one and beyond were the stuff of legend, but most of them were precisely that. Legend. All very well to toast such ancient victories until you had to face those odds yourself.

Sharrowkyn's vox crackled and the brusque tones of Vermana Cybus filled his helmet.

'What do you see?' asked the commander of the X Legion's Morlocks.

'One column of Emperor's Children is slowing down, but the Iron Warriors are pressing on,' he said. 'Multiple company strengths of armour, minimum of fifteen thousand warriors and supporting artillery. And two Reaver battle engines.'

To Cybus's credit, the vast array of enemy power advancing on his position didn't appear to faze him.

'How long until they reach the sepulchre?' he demanded.

'No more than ten minutes.'

'Right, we'll be waiting,' said Cybus. 'Get back here now.'

The vox spat static and went silent.

Wayland had heard the exchange and felt Sharrowkyn's aversion to Cybus. 'A hard man to like, but a good one to follow.'

Sharrowkyn shook his head. 'He's forgotten that he is a leader of men. He takes your Legion's reverence for iron and makes a virtue of flesh-hate.'

'You misunderstand us,' said Wayland. 'My brothers and I, we do not hate flesh, we just know that it cannot be relied upon like iron.'

'Too subtle a distinction for me,' said Sharrowkyn.

'I highly doubt that.'

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘You know as well as I that warriors need to feel they’re following a being of flesh and blood, someone who understands and shares the risks they’re being asked to take.’

‘Deliverance?’

Sharrowkyn nodded. ‘The lessons learned during the uprising are still fresh, and any Raven Guard commander who forgets them will soon find he has no army left to lead.’

‘Perhaps you are right, but this is not the time to speak of it,’ said Wayland. ‘They are on the move again.’

Sharrowkyn followed Wayland’s gaze and saw that his comrade was right. Whatever madness had seized the Emperor’s Children had abated, and a measure of order had been restored. Among the traitors, Sharrowkyn recognised a whip-wielding warrior, the consummate swordsman he had faced aboard the *Sisypheum*.

He felt an unseemly thrill of recognition, reliving their duel on the embarkation deck in a heartbeat. Sharrowkyn had never faced an opponent like him and he could not have predicted the outcome had their dance of blades not been interrupted.

‘What is it?’ asked Wayland.

‘A familiar face,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘Someone I want to kill.’

TWENTY

Isha’s Doom

This World is Alive

I Know Labyrinths

Kroeger’s column of rumbling vehicles, marching infantry and mobile artillery – with their barrels raised to the heavens – reached the heart of the citadel first. Moving unopposed, there was little need for caution, for Kroeger felt emptiness like a physical absence in his gut. Only by an exercise of his will was he able to quell the urge to charge at speed for their objective.

The advance through the citadel had grated at his nerves. The rasping, unfocused hostility he felt from every lambent green wall was like a weapon aimed at his head. His body was flooded with combat stimms and he flexed his fingers on the grip of his chainsword. He wanted to kill something, anything, just to feel the release of the tension that had been building in him ever since they had landed on this world.

The column spread out as it emerged from the wide plaza-street, moving smoothly into a staggered line. Despite his avowed distrust of Harkor, the warriors of his former Grand Battalion were well trained and highly disciplined.

And if there was one place capable of sealing in the remains of a doomed god, the building at the heart of *Amon ny-shak Kaelis* was it. The Sepulchre of Isha’s Doom was a monumental palace, sprawling and richly ornamented with bulbous mourn-towers and sweeping, ivory-roofed domes. Its facades were awash with curling arches and lofty processionals that were at once airy and crafted as if spun from moonbeams, and yet possessed of a strength that belied their gossamer fragility. The entire structure was like a great sculpture of ice and glass, like a natural accretion of organic crystal that had grown in some dark cave and which, once exposed to the light, had furiously accelerated its growth in new and unexpected ways. It was a wholly natural-looking formation, but the subtlety of its precise ratios was impossible to miss; organic and artificial at the

same time.

The enormous structure was all contradiction – fortified and open, geometric and yet seemingly unfettered by the constraints of an architect. Thousands of the same crystalline statues that lined every roadway stood immobile in glittering alcoves and atop ranked plinths along the curving walkways that led up to a tall opening in its frontage, a narrow portal flanked by two enormous replicas of the smaller sentinels. They were easily the equal in size – if not stature – of the Mortis engines; Kroeger had seen similar war machines wreak havoc on the battlefield.

But these representations were unmoving and glassy, fragile and easily broken.

The undersea light that permeated the entire citadel was strongest here, the walls of the Sepulchre of Isha's Doom radiant with their own inner illumination. The smooth stone of the ground was veined with that same glow, capillaries of energy and a network of living light. Kroeger's footfalls left lightless bruises on the ground and he felt as though he were walking on the surface of some planet-wide neural network.

A Rhino forested with vox-aerials ground to a halt next to him, black worms of unlight spreading from the pressing weight of its bulk. Kroeger felt Harkor's presence before his lieutenant spoke.

'Something you should hear,' said Harkor, a vox headset pressed to his ear.

'What is it?' snapped Kroeger; angry, but unable to say why.

Harkor held out the headset and said, 'Listen.'

Kroeger removed his helmet and climbed onto the running board of the vehicle. He snatched the headset and mashed it to the side of his head. He heard nothing beyond a mournful howl of static, rising and falling like a desert wind at night.

'What am I supposed to be hearing?' he asked.

'Keep listening,' urged Harkor.

Kroeger kept the headset pressed to the side of his face as the lead elements of Perturabo's column emerged from the wide streets a kilometre and a half to the east. Streaming honour banners were just visible over the roofs of the intervening structures, and the honking bellows of the two Titans echoed dully through the open plaza. Kroeger's gaze strayed farther east, but there was no sign of Falk's column yet.

'I'm not hearing anything apart from static,' he said.

'Listen harder.'

Kroeger glared at Harkor, wondering how much trouble it would cause were

he to kill the former warsmith right now. He dismissed the idea as he heard snatches of what sounded like Imperial Gothic mired in the static. Nothing certain and nothing he could fully understand, but there was *something* there.

‘What is it?’

‘Encrypted vox traffic,’ said Harkor. ‘Tenth Legion comms.’

Harkor watched as Kroeger’s commandeered Rhino raced off to rejoin Perturabo’s blade of the Trident thrust at the citadel’s vitals. He found it impossible to keep the sneer from his lips at the thought that he had been displaced from command by a common thug like Kroeger. The man had no nobility to him and possessed little in the way of culture. Harkor had done his research and knew that Kroeger had no blood worth a damn in his lineage. He was peasant-born, a ragamuffin child with a fortuitous confluence of genes and a barely acceptable level of genetic variance that only just kept him from being rejected by the Legion’s fleshsmiths.

To have such a low-born fool in command of a Grand Battalion was an insult to the honour of the Legion. The thought made him shiver in disgust, and he keyed the vox to the previously agreed-upon frequency, one at the very edge of usability.

‘You were right,’ he said, not identifying himself and knowing that only one person would be listening on the other end. ‘His anger is growing beyond his control.’

A swoop and sway of static followed, with clicks and burps of encryption.

‘You told him of the Tenth Legion vox traffic?’ said a voice heavy with distortion.

‘I did,’ said Harkor. ‘And it was all he could do not to charge the sepulchre all by himself with his sword waving.’

‘He is low-born,’ said the voice. ‘You can expect little else from those not of noble lineage.’

‘It galls me that Perturabo cannot see it.’

‘The Lord of Iron is wise in many things, but he was wrong to remove you from leadership,’ said the voice. ‘Having mongrels like Kroeger in command is the thin end of the wedge. It is indicative of a slide into mediocrity that will lead to polluted bloodlines being raised to the fighting ranks.’

‘Over my dead body,’ spat Harkor.

‘We are the noble blood of Olympia,’ said the voice. ‘We have that uniting factor, and blood will prove true in the end.’

‘But we can hasten that end, yes?’

‘Indeed we can,’ said the voice. ‘And not just for Kroeger. Forrix can trace his blood to one of the Twelve, but he will never support your reinstatement.’

‘Then he has to die too,’ said Harkor.

‘I am master of the Stor-bezashk,’ said Toramino. ‘I can make that happen.’

Perturabo didn’t need the flickering data streams cascading down the side of his visor display to know that they had reached their destination. The Sepulchre of Isha’s Doom was an edifice like no other he had seen or imagined. The proportions were effortlessly harmonious, its structural elements innately perfect in a way that no amount of training or study could replicate. There could be no other temple raised that would do justice to the final resting place of a god.

Except there likely was no god, he reminded himself.

‘Takes your breath away, doesn’t it?’ said Fulgrim, approaching with his Phoenix Guard and the cringing form of Karuchi Vohra. ‘Beyond anything you or I might design and commit to the earth.’

Perturabo bristled at the thinly veiled insult, and only bit back a bitter response because he knew Fulgrim was correct. Just looking at the spun sugar of its web-like flying buttresses and coiling walkways, he knew he could never have designed anything like it. Yet that did not lessen the sting of Fulgrim’s words or the apparent pleasure his brother took in voicing them.

‘No, perhaps not,’ he agreed. ‘But it’s what’s within that interests me more.’

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Fulgrim, staring with undisguised hunger at the wondrous tomb-palace. ‘It gladdens my soul to finally see the object of our quest.’

Perturabo looked past his brother to Karuchi Vohra. The eldar guide seemed even more apprehensive now that they had finally reached their goal, as though just being here was making him ill. He had the sickly pallor of withdrawal and body-wide shivers.

‘Your guide doesn’t appear to think so,’ he said. ‘Why is that, Vohra?’

The eldar swallowed heavily and looked up at Perturabo through eyes the colour of bloodstained milk, ‘Would you be happy to visit a mass grave? Does being in the presence of the dead make you smile?’

Vohra’s tone was insubordinate, verging on hostile, and Perturabo thought of killing the eldar right now.

‘This is no grave,’ he said. ‘This is a city built to the memory of the dead, nothing more.’

‘Be kind to the creature,’ said Fulgrim, though even he was openly sceptical of

the eldar's explanation. 'We are here and that is in no small measure down to my allowing him to live.'

'So we're here, now what?' asked Perturabo.

'Isn't it obvious?' said Fulgrim. 'We go in.'

To a warrior raised on a volcanic world of molten rivers and sulphurous skies, cold was normally something Atesh Tarsa felt keenly, but he no longer felt the chill of the apothecarion. Though he had stripped down to his thin bodyglove to avoid any possible secondary heating of Ulrach Branthan's casket from the power plant of his warplate, the discomfort of the low temperatures was more than offset by the stasis-sealed mystery before him.

Frater Thamatica had run diagnostic checks on all the machines keeping Branthan alive and had found no flaws, no unexpected quirks in their construction and nothing that could adequately explain how a bolter wound had miraculously vanished from a warrior kept entirely in a time out of time.

Miraculous…

A word so casually deployed, but one that silences inquisition. Calling something a miracle denied enquiry by attributing an ineffability to its occurrence. The credo of the apothecarion was that there were no such things as miracles, only events. Only when the explanation of an event was more incredible than the event itself could such a thing be counted as miraculous.

Right now, Tarsa was inclined to believe in miracles.

He had examined the wound as best he could through the inviolable bubble surrounding Branthan, and there could be no doubt that the wound had almost entirely vanished. Not completely, for there was a pinkish cast to the skin, indicative of scarring and healing.

Even outside a stasis field, such a wound would have taken longer to heal.

With the warriors of the X Legion below on the planet the eldar guide had brought them to, the *Sisypheum* felt very empty, its corridors prowled by servitors who cared nothing for the comfort of lonely souls left aboard ship while there was fighting to be done. Tarsa was a warrior too, one of some note amongst his fellow Nocturneans, but the care of Ulrach Branthan could be left to no one else but an Apothecary.

Besides, the mission to the planet's surface had the whiff of revenge to it, and such missions rarely ended well.

Frater Thamatica remained in the bowels of the ship, undoing the damage his ill-advised experiment had caused. Tarsa remembered the furious argument

between the Frater and Cadmus Tyro, like two thunderheads colliding. But Tyro was a captain and the designated proxy of Ulrach Branthan. Thamatica was going nowhere.

Tarsa paced the apothecarion, tapping his fingertips over the surface of his data-slate, reviewing the latest batch of monitoring readings. Ulrach Branthan's biometrics were slowed to a standstill by the temperature, let alone the stasis field, and the results were the same as the last hundred times he had checked them.

Nothing could change within a stasis field – something that should be self-evident – but somehow in that unchanging environment, something *had* changed. Branthan's body had managed to heal itself. Or, rather, something had caused it to heal without registering on any of the highly advanced, incredibly accurate monitoring devices.

Could it be the Heart of Iron?

In all his probes of Branthan's flesh, this alone was an element of uncertainty. Not even the Iron Hands could explain its workings. All that was known of the artefact was that Ferrus Manus was said to have been given it by a ghost in the Land of Shadows centuries ago. As contrary to the Imperial Truth and as unlikely as that sounded, it was the only explanation Tarsa had been given as to its provenance.

Every senior Iron Hand claimed to have some relic of vanished technology from that desolate, benighted wasteland. The place must have been a veritable treasure trove of plunder, with ghosts lining up to hand over their priceless trinkets.

Dismissing such thoughts, Tarsa retuned his attention to the grievously wounded warrior. Unmoving icy mist fogged the casket, but Tarsa's red orbs could easily pierce the translucent sheen to the warrior below. Branthan's body, regardless of any healed bolter wound, was still a mess of bloody skin and ruptured flesh, broken bones and shredded musculature. The Heart of Iron remained locked to his chest, a silent, unmoving parasite whose function defied easy explanation.

From what little Tarsa could ascertain, he believed the device was attempting to regrow the inner structure of the captain's body. Yet it was doing so by feeding on – for want of a better term – his life force. On a warrior whose wounds were not mortal, it would probably heal the damage without killing him, but Branthan's injuries were so severe that any healing done would be at the expense of his life.

This miracle would likely kill him.

Tarsa circled the casket, all the while knowing that there was nothing more he could do for the man inside without detailed real-time data. There was only one way to gather such data, and Cadmus Tyro would never allow him to bring Branthan out of stasis without a cadre of Iron Hands around in case those moments turned out to be his last.

But Cadmus Tyro wasn't here.

The warriors of Nocturne were not known for their rebellious streak, in fact the chains of duty in which they wrapped themselves bound them to causes and courses of action that might be deemed unwise, but which were followed through to the end. Yet Tarsa felt his hand inching towards the machinery regulating the casket's temperature and the gene-locked stasis controls.

'To help you I need to bring you close to death,' he said, the further damage that might be done by rousing Branthan from his cryonic state conflicting with his oath to do no harm. He resolved that dilemma by rationalising that if he were able to save the captain then that damage would be an acceptable price to pay.

The thought of Tyro and Cybus's retribution should something go wrong momentarily stayed his hand. Even were he to learn something vital, they would still be furious, so there was really no sense in hesitating. Tarsa was heartsick at keeping a man in a state of vegetative existence, a man who was dead in all but the most generous terms.

Wasn't it, in fact, doing more harm keeping Branthan like this?

His moral quandary resolved, Tarsa quickly set up his bio-recording equipment, plugging his narthecium into the casket to monitor every aspect of Ulrach Branthan's physiology. If he was going to do this, he'd have to do it right, leaving nothing to chance and seizing every opportunity to gather as much information as he could.

With everything set up, Tarsa unlocked the controls. He took a breath of cold air, now feeling the chill of the sterile apothecarion settling in his bones. Or was it the chill of uncertainty? He had already made his mind up, so he didn't know why he was hesitating. Was he giving himself one last chance to turn back, realising that he might be about to kill Branthan?

Tarsa turned the brass dial of the power coupling to zero and the stasis field fell away like a dropped theatre curtain. The curling mists in the casket churned as time recommenced within, and the frozen captain once again rejoined the natural flow of the universe. Having crossed this rubicon, Tarsa now began to increase the temperature of the captain's body in fractional increments. The

lights on his narthecium blinked and clicked as swarms of data mobbed its memory coils. The bio-monitoring equipment chattered as fresh information flowed from the thawing body, spewing ticker-tapes of punched data-ribbons.

The devices showed increased neural activity in the pre-frontal lobes, and a general increase in synapse communications. Soon, the captain's brain would reach a level where cognition and awareness would be restored. When that happened, Tarsa would need to be succinct in his questions.

Brain activity continued to rise, and he watched the Heart of Iron as it extruded yet more hair-fine filaments into Branthan's body. The segmented limbs slithered around his body, as though probing for something, and it vented a thin stream of toxic fumes that smelled of rotting flesh.

'*–ers,*' said Branthan, finishing a sentence that had begun weeks ago.

'Captain. I am Apothecary Tarsa. Your wounds are healing, but I am gathering information to ascertain why.'

A pause while the captain's barely thawed brain raced to catch up to the present.

'*The mission?*'

'Is ongoing,' said Tarsa, watching the spiking volume of data flow from the casket. 'We are at the target world and your warriors are attempting to foil the traitor's plans.'

Branthan's brain activity suddenly spiked with waveforms Tarsa had never seen and which caused the captain's body to twitch and spasm. Tarsa rose to his feet, looking into the casket as Ulrach Branthan's eyes flickered with an eldritch green light.

'*Iydris…*'

'Captain?'

'*This world. The dead call it Iydris.*'

'I don't understand, captain,' said Tarsa. Had the captain been having lucid dreams while he was locked in stasis? That should be impossible, but if this mission into the heart of a warp storm had taught Tarsa anything, it was that words like impossible were for the foolish and the unwary. The green shimmer to Branthan's eyes was surely a sign of something very wrong, but he hesitated to drop the temperature and re-engage the stasis field.

Instead, he asked: 'What dead?'

'*The souls of Iydris, I hear them all. They're crying out in terror.*'

The captain's voice trailed off, and Tarsa realised Branthan's synapse network had decayed to the point where he was experiencing auditory hallucinations. It

would be a mercy to let him die now before the honourable hero he had been was reduced to a rambling madman.

‘*You have to stop the Angel Exterminatus,*’ said Branthan, as Tarsa’s hand hovered over the temperature controls.

‘What did you say?’ asked Tarsa. The data squirt inloaded by Sabik Wayland had included mention of the mythical creature, but Branthan’s words felt more specific, more immediately relevant.

‘*He seeks to be reborn on Iydris. You have to stop it.*’

Tarsa struggled to connect the captain’s words with what Wayland and Sharrowkyn had heard on Hydra Cordatus. The Angel Exterminatus was a dead god of the eldar, imprisoned beneath the world by their race’s supreme deity. What that actually meant in real terms wasn’t clear, but something of Branthan’s utterances didn’t gel.

‘What *is* the Angel Exterminatus?’ asked Tarsa, instinctively knowing this was the most important question he would ever ask.

‘*All the very worst things in the world given flesh and form.*’

‘How do you know this?’

‘*This world, it’s alive. It cries for help. It waits.*’

‘It waits?’ asked Tarsa. ‘What is it waiting for?’

‘*For its makers to carry the dead home.*’

A cordon was established around the sepulchre, and it was immediately apparent that it would need no lengthy siege to breach its walls. It boasted no defences and no emplaced guns, its approaches were unmarked by deep ditches, firepits, minefields or tearing wires, and the portal between the towering, crystalline giants was unbarred by any gate.

Perturabo instructed Forrix to begin work on establishing a fortified position in the open plaza before the sepulchre, and his lead triarch set about the task with gusto, requisitioning every available Rhino for the task. To surround the sepulchre would require thousands more Castellan Rhinos, thus Forrix crafted a rectangular secure area with angled bastion corners, the simplest fortress to craft with no blind spots. As each Rhino was driven into place and the armour plates unfolded, the central area of the plaza changed from being a place of shimmering light and ghostly laments on the wind to a place of cold iron, black spikes, coiled razorwire and armoured emplacements.

Few, even among the IV Legion, knew fortifications like Forrix, and even as Perturabo looked over, the final towers were rising at the corners of the

emplaced position. The Mortis engines lifted the last elements into place as a final pair of Rhinos backed into position to form the two leaves of a motorised gate.

‘Your warrior works fast,’ noted Fulgrim, and Perturabo saw the jittering urge to be moving in every twitch of his limbs and every tic on his alabaster features. ‘But we should not linger.’

‘The weapons aren’t going anywhere,’ said Perturabo. ‘We don’t move until I have confirmation our fortified positions are secure.’

Fulgrim nodded, but there was a curt impatience to it.

Perturabo already knew all three fortified positions were in readiness. Despite the resistance of the rock, the fortress surrounding the landing zone was now secure, as was the makeshift fortress of Rhinos around the citadel’s walls. This latest fortification was as good as complete, but Perturabo took the time to study Fulgrim and his assembled host.

His brother was sheened in sweat, but it was not perspiration that beaded his brow.

Fulgrim was sweating light.

Faintly, to be sure, but visible to genhanced sight that saw beyond what even legionary eyes saw. Beads of light gathered at Fulgrim’s fingertips and fell to the ground, where they were swallowed by the earth and dissipated. He wondered if Fulgrim was aware of the radiance bleeding from him and decided he must be. His brother’s armour strained against his body and his features were drawn and tired, as though only by an effort of will was he still standing.

His captains looked no better, like hounds straining at the leash. Kaesoron stuck close to Fulgrim’s side, while Vairosean and his shrieking warriors roared and seethed with their bizarre sonic cannons. Eidolon and a cadre of bulky warriors in Cataphractii Terminator armour stood ready to spearhead the Emperor’s Children’s advance. The Lord Commander’s flesh was suffused with a similar light to that enveloping Fulgrim, a deathly radiance that had no place within a living being.

Alone of the Phoenician’s warriors, the swordsman Lucius seemed unaffected by the sense of potentiality that coursed through the Emperor’s Children. He glanced over towards Perturabo, as though aware of the scrutiny, and gave him an expansive bow. Perturabo saw through the blatant insincerity and felt a killing urge that saw him lift *Forgebreaker* from its harness at his back.

Karuchi Vohra stood next to Fulgrim, his hands knotting and twisting like a guilty man who knew they would never be clean of blood. Perturabo knew he

should kill the eldar now, just crush his frail body with one blow of his hammer, but he sensed there was yet something he could learn from their guide.

Kroeger and Falk appeared, each warrior giving him a nod of readiness.

Only two blades of his Trident would follow him, but that would have to be enough.

The Iron Circle lifted their shields as Perturabo sent a pulse of activation through his MIU to the organic wetware of their cybernetic control centres.

‘Does that mean we can go now?’ asked Fulgrim, needy and irritating.

‘It does,’ said Perturabo.

The warriors chosen to accompany the two primarchs within the crystal beauty of the domed sepulchre marched in their wake; the Iron Warriors as regimented as the day they had first formed up on the martial fields of Olympus, the Emperor’s Children like a host of raucous barbarians. Hundreds of banners flew overhead and the howling skirl of sonic weapons battered the air and tortured the ears with their echoes.

Thousands of Fulgrim’s followers came too, each bearing rigid containers across their shoulders. Perturabo had watched them unload the cargo-20s and fill those containers with what looked like crystal shards. Burdened by such heavy weight, they would not keep up with the legionaries, and Perturabo wasn’t about to wait for them.

With the Iron Circle forming a heavy wedge of shields before them, Perturabo and Fulgrim led the way up a curling walkway that approached the main portal. Only as they drew near did its scale truly become apparent. Three hundred metres high and twenty wide, it was a vertical slash in the translucent crystal walls of the citadel. The sea-green glow that spread to the rest of the fortress was, it seemed, a radiance that only went one way. Inside, all was darkness, an enfolding blackness that swallowed the light and allowed none to escape. Perturabo was reminded of the great singularity at the heart of the Eye of Terror, and did not care for that likeness one bit.

Was the interior of the Sepulchre of Isha’s Doom a region that could be spatially mapped or did its internal geography owe nothing to empirical measurements?

‘I can feel it,’ said Fulgrim as they marched between the clawed feet of the flanking guardians of the sepulchre. Light flickered through them like glittering shoals of fish darting away from a hunter’s lure. Nothing here had yet reacted to their presence, but how long that would last once they were inside was something Perturabo wasn’t keen to find out.

Perturabo halted their advance and turned to his brother.

‘Before we go any further, there is something I have to ask you, brother,’ said Perturabo.

Fulgrim’s eyes narrowed, tense and wary. ‘What?’

‘Is there anything I should know?’ Perturabo asked. ‘I give you this one last chance to tell me anything you have kept to yourself.’

Perturabo saw the lie before it was spoken.

‘No, brother,’ said the Phoenician. ‘All is as I have told you.’

Perturabo nodded, the answer exactly what he’d expected. He turned away from Fulgrim and with his warriors at his side and his robotic guardians around him, marched into the sepulchre.

Darkness welcomed him, folding around his senses in a way that confirmed it was wholly unnatural. His senses spread out, questing at the edges of his perceptions in ways unknown to mortals. What would be unremitting blackness, impenetrable and cloying and impossible to escape, was – to him – merely a gloaming.

The portal led them within an echoing vestibule of sorts, its colossal dimensions seeming to alter with every glance. A number of passageways led onwards, leaf-shaped arches of deeper darkness, but Perturabo found it next to impossible to fix on exactly how many there were.

‘Parlour tricks,’ sneered Fulgrim, looking around the twisting passageways leading off in many different directions at once.

‘No,’ said Perturabo. ‘It’s much more than that.’

‘Eldar witchery,’ spat Fulgrim. ‘Nothing of note.’

The beads of light falling from Fulgrim’s eyes were radiant tears, and the droplets sweating from his hands bloomed into liquid sunspots as they struck the marble-smooth floor of the sepulchre. Even the mortal warriors could see the Phoenician’s light within these walls. The Emperor’s Children cried out in adoration. The Iron Warriors ignored it.

Perturabo kept his gaze fixed on the black walls before him, seeing something in the shifting pathways and capricious dimensions of this space that was familiar to him. He had seen workings like this before.

‘It’s a labyrinth,’ he said. ‘And I *know* labyrinths.’

From a position of concealment high on a domed tomb farther out in the precincts opposite the citadel, Nykona Sharrowkyn and Sabik Wayland watched the two primarchs lead their warriors within. Perhaps a thousand legionaries and

as many mortals had followed them, a narrow column that snaked inside like a parasitic worm infesting a host.

‘Cybus isn’t going to like this,’ said Wayland.

‘His likes and dislikes are immaterial to me,’ said Sharrowkyn.

‘Easy for you to say,’ replied Wayland. ‘Eventually you’ll go back to your Legion.’

Sharrowkyn said nothing in reply, and pict-captured images of the dreadful fortification in the centre of the plaza, knowing that to assault it would cost thousands of lives. Built with incredible economy of time and effort, its towers were guns taken from the Rhinos and armoured vehicles that formed its walls, and wire-surrounded emplacements housed growling Land Raiders that acted as mobile strongpoints.

‘Is that a Shadowsword?’ said Wayland.

On a raised platform in the centre of the fortification was a super-heavy tank, but one up-armoured and bulked out to an incredible degree.

‘Perturabo’s command tank,’ answered Sharrowkyn.

‘Its weapon systems can cover every inch of the walls and its main gun will simply obliterate anything that comes within its line of fire.’

‘Then we stay out of its line of fire,’ said Sharrowkyn.

Two Reaver battle engines bearing the banners and colours of the Legio Mortis faced off against their glassy counterparts, guns trained on them with unwavering precision. Perturabo’s warriors were nothing if not thorough.

‘A direct assault on this position will be suicidal,’ declared Wayland.

‘That’s never been the way of the Nineteenth,’ said Sharrowkyn.

‘I’ve come to learn that,’ said Wayland. ‘Come on, Captain Tyro needs to know there’s no chance of getting in this way.’

Sharrowkyn nodded and moved away from the edge of the roof. This far away from the enemy there was no need to *wraith-slip*, but he did it anyway. Ever since they’d made planetfall, Sharrowkyn’s preternatural senses had felt hostile eyes upon him, unseen observers watching his every move like a snake preparing to strike. Even moving with all the skill he could muster, he knew they could see him.

With sure steps, dizzying powered leaps and precipitous drops, Sharrowkyn and Wayland made their way to the sheltered portion of the ground where the incursion force of Iron Hands waited. Sharrowkyn dropped into shadow, stepping into full view of Cadmus Tyro and Vermana Cybus. Ignatius Numen and Septus Thoic held the quivering form of Varuchi Vohra between them, and

Brother Bombastus towered over them all, the monstrous flamer flickering with a hot jet of blue light.

‘Well?’ asked Cadmus Tyro. ‘Can we fight our way in?’

The captain’s face was unreadable behind the iron mask of his helm. His warplate was scored with hundreds of names, so many that there was as much revealed ceramite as there was black paint. He had been in the thick of the hardest fighting on Isstvan, and it was easy to forget he had suffered as much as the rest of them. The golden-winged form of Garuda perched on his shoulder guard, wings folded back and its red eyes reminding Sharrowkyn of Atesh Tarsa.

The eagle had a sleek look to it that Sharrowkyn liked – a hunter on the wing, like him.

‘Not a chance,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘The Iron Warriors already have a fortress built right in front of the entrance. Nothing short of a full Legion assault would be able to punch through to the entrance.’

‘Then we’ve come this way for nothing!’ snapped Cybus, slamming a fist into his palm. ‘I said this was a doomed enterprise from the beginning. We’ve wasted our time coming here!’

‘You don’t agree?’ said Tyro, reading Sharrowkyn’s body language.

‘Fighting the Iron Warriors head-on will see us all dead,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘On that, Cybus and I agree, but we don’t need to fight them head-on.’

‘What do you mean?’ demanded Tyro.

Sharrowkyn beckoned Numen and Thoic forwards, and they hauled the sickly-looking eldar guide to stand before him.

‘Because the front door isn’t the only way in, is it?’

Varuchi Vohra looked up and nodded, the flesh of his face stretched tight like grease-paper over his jutting bones, his skin veined with purple lines and textured with an oily veneer.

‘No,’ said the eldar. ‘There are other ways to enter.’

TWENTY-ONE

Fragments of a Greater Whole

Immaterial Mathematics

They Never Were

The nightmare of his existence hadn’t ended; in fact, it had only worsened. Felix Cassander – though that name meant little to him now – stalked back and forth in what had once been a medicae quarantine bay aboard the *Pride of the Emperor*. His bones ached, each joint stiff with broken-glass pain and his one remaining lung filled with acid-burning fluids that he hacked up his throat with crippling regularity.

His supra-engineered frame was keeping him alive despite his fervent desire for death.

He and Navarra were two amongst perhaps a dozen of Fabius’s terata that had survived the assault on the Iron Hands vessel. Navarra lay in abject misery in the corner of the quarantine cell, his mutated body undulant with motion as his internal anatomy combined and split apart in genetic revolt and his limbs reshaped themselves in response to hyper-mutation of his base-pairs.

The terata were little better than beasts now, howling, mindless things of appetite and aggression, but Cassander and Navarra alone had held onto the remembrance of their former lives. Navarra’s mind hung by a thread, a teetering consciousness that kept true to the word of Dorn only thanks to Cassander’s incessant repetition of the Legion’s roll of honour, starting with the *Victorix Roma* and ending with *Honoris Martius*. His own fractured sense of self remembered who he was, where he had come from, but most of all it remembered what he had done.

He had killed Space Marines loyal to the Imperium. He was no better than the Emperor’s Children or the Iron Warriors. The pain of his minute-by-minute existence was nothing compared to that. It was his punishment, his penance for giving in to adversity. He was one of the Emperor’s own Fists, a warrior against

whom no foe could triumph, for whom no obstacle could delay and no pain could master.

All of it a lie.

Cassander picked at his muscle-bloated arms, the flesh scabbed with pus-filled sores that refused to heal as fresh toxins made war against his gene-twisted immune system. He had picked all the flesh from his right hand, leaving it a rotten, meat-flaked ruin. Rich crimson blood coated the bones there, the digits held together by strings of sinew and scraps of regenerative muscle tissue. He'd scraped intricate patterns into the bone with the overgrown claws of his other hand, relishing the agony of his self-mutilation and knowing it wasn't nearly enough to atone for what he had allowed to happen.

He could still see the face of the legionary whose throat he had ripped out, the hatred that burned in his eyes. It was a hatred well earned. Though he had torn the flesh from his hand, he knew it would never be free of the loyal blood it had spilled. He tried to keep his focus on the blood, hoping that preoccupation with pain would keep the horror of what he had done and what he had become at bay.

Cassander's perceptions were becoming ever more erratic, a collage of nightmarish images that belonged in a madman's skull. Torturous experiments, pain-filled lights in his eyes and the crack of breaking bones as his body was continually reshaped and regrown. The passage of time itself was out of sequence, fragments of memory making no sense from one instant to the next.

One moment he was clawing the skin and meat from his guilty hand, the next he was staring up at a bank of lumen-strips in a clinically austere chamber of white ceramic tiles and steel girders painted a bilious industrial green. Being strapped to the gurney meant pain, and pain was all he wanted now. Pain meant escape. Pain was penance.

The source of all his pain leaned over him, haloed in stark light and clicking machine arms.

'You are special, my child,' Fabius told him, a rivulet of black blood running from the corner of his mouth. 'You Fists retain your higher functions. The rest devolve to beasts, but not you two. Why is that, I wonder?'

Cassander wanted to reach for the demented Apothecary and tear out his throat, but the chains securing him to the table this time were as good as unbreakable. Fabius grinned his corpse-grin at him and shook his head.

'You think I learned nothing from our last *contretemps*?' said Fabius, stepping away and altering the angle of the gurney upon which Cassander lay. 'The *Pride of the Emperor* might not be as… private as the *Andronicus*, but it at least has the

virtue of many well-equipped medicae levels.’

In complete opposition to the Apothecary’s previous lair, this space was brightly lit and organised much like a conventional medicae facility. The walls were lined with machinery that Cassander could not identify, save that they were all bespoke creations that no Apothecary in a loyal Legion would sanction using. Secured cabinets were filled with green glass beakers in which swilled unidentifiable mutant offspring, genetic abnormalities and hideously deformed foetal stages. Rows of reductor ampoules, each one labelled with a Legion symbol and engraved with what looked like a name sat in a glass cryo-vat filled with coils of nitrous gases. Tissue baths, centrifuges and retorts bearing bubbling tubes and bell jars hissed, spat and boiled on a silver-steel workbench, and an opened corpse lay on the gurney to his left, amid the labelled, spliced and sectioned portions of his inner anatomy. The corpse had no head, but a Legion tattoo on his right bicep revealed him to be IV Legion.

‘Turning on your own now?’ said Cassander through his mangled jaw structure.

Fabius turned to look at the dissected corpse as though he had forgotten it was there. ‘Even before Horus chose rebellion,’ he said.

‘Why?’ gurgled Cassander, flexing the bones of his mutilated hand as it throbbed painfully.

‘Because we are led to believe we are perfect creations,’ said Fabius, coughing a wad of black phlegm and holding his chest. ‘but nothing could be further from the truth. We are fragments of a greater whole, pale reflections of something incredible. Each of the Legions’ genetic structure contains a piece of that perfection, and I would know every secret of the Emperor’s workings.’

‘Why?’ repeated Cassander, knowing it was the most important question.

‘Because I don’t want to die,’ said Fabius, opening his robes to reveal two suppurating wounds crusted with tarry deposits. Sword wounds, but ones that hadn’t healed. ‘The Emperor’s soldiers who came before us, the Thunder Warriors, their gene-code carried the seeds of their own destruction. And the gene-boosted savages before them? They were fortunate to live as long as they did before their hyper-metabolism consumed them. The primarchs think their warriors are immortal, but they are wrong. We are as mortal as any living thing, we just take longer to die. I would not have it so.’

‘You want to live forever?’

‘Of course,’ said Fabius, angry he should even ask such a question. ‘Don’t you?’

‘No,’ hissed Cassander. ‘I want to die with every breath.’

Fabius leaned over him, and the chirurgeon extended its claw-like calliper arms. The razor-thin line of a thermal cutter sparked to life. A host of thick needles extended from another arm, followed by a blood siphon and a clacking suture gun on two more.

‘If that were true, then why have you not dashed your brains out against the walls of your cell?’ asked Fabius with the keen interest of a scholar.

Cassander had only one answer. ‘Because I am weak,’ he said, his powerful, mutated and abhorrent form heaving in torment.

‘No, my child, you are strong, so very strong. The others super-combusted with the fury of their accelerated metabolism, but not you or your Legion brother,’ said Fabius, almost tenderly. ‘That’s why I need to open you up again.’

The thermal cutter descended and the pain began again.

Atonement and agony, penance and pain.

Cassander welcomed them all.

Warsmith Toramino paced the ramparts of the landing-zone fortress, watching with ever-greater anger as the Pneumachina and his warriors battled to shore up the walls. Cracks spread and stone crumbled with every passing moment.

This world was anathema to the raising of foreign walls, and the sooner they were done with this place the better. Not even the aural filters on his helm could keep out the keening wail of the wind, and the crepuscular glow emanating from the distant city was grating on Toramino’s nerves.

Bad enough that he had been denied his rightful place in the Trident, but now he had been left as little better than a watchman. The master of the Stor-bezashk commanded firepower like no other, a host of ordnance and the means to deploy it. That he should be consigned to this lowly role was an insult to his pride and to the honour of his title.

True, in a warzone, such a task was a position of great importance and respect, but defending empty platforms and runways enclosed by high walls, minefields and acres of razorwire on a deserted world was a task with no honour and which offered no hopes for advancement. Such a task was for low-born fools like the Stonewrought or, more appropriately, Kroeger.

Harkor’s foolish recklessness on Hydra Cordatus had brought this situation about, but the former warsmith of the 23rd Grand Battalion was Olympian high-born, and even a fool of a noble was better than peon scum like Kroeger.

Toramino paused to look back into the heart of the defences constructed within

the crumbling and sagging walls. A forest of cannon barrels angled to the sky like a thousand arms raised in salute: howitzers, bombards, Thunderstrikes, mortars, rocket batteries and precision hunter-killer missiles. Gunmasters and their crews swarmed their weapons, ready to unleash a rain of explosive death on any target that presented itself. Not that Toramino particularly expected that target to be a foe in the traditional sense.

It galled him that circumstances had forced his hand to fratricide, but when backed into a corner by the ignorance and jealousy of fools, what could any high-born warrior of rank and position do but fight back? He called up the schematics of the city onto his data-slate, the real-time information fed to him by the topographical data engines on the Castellan Rhinos. A three-dimensional image of the city, its buildings and the location of the Iron Warriors advance fortress hovered before him.

With such detailed target information, Toramino could flatten the eldar tomb city with a word or pick out one structure to demolish while leaving the rest untouched by so much as a shrapnel scar. He fed the data to the target-acquisition engines of his gunmasters, relishing the sheer destructive power at his command.

Toramino put away his data-slate as the wind's lament changed in pitch, becoming more strident and insistent. He banged a palm against the side of his helmet, cursing and shaking his head in an effort to silence it. It was no use, the sound was only getting more irritating, and Toramino unsnapped the gorget seals, tearing his helmet off to reveal his patrician features and mane of ivory hair.

He sat the helmet on a toothed merlon and tilted his head to the side.

Toramino's eyes narrowed as he stared at the horizon in puzzlement.

A faint haze rippled at the farthest extremes of his sight, a blur of greenish light like the approach of a distant sandstorm.

'What *is* that?' he wondered over the keening wail of the mournful wind.

Perturabo led the way, the pace necessarily slow as the enveloping darkness made haste impossible. The advance force kept tight together, a column of armoured warriors with blades bared and firearms primed. Even Fulgrim's host kept their howls and chants to themselves. The heavy footfalls of Warsmith Berossus echoed from the obsidian walls, and the brittle clatter of glass from the containers being carried by Fulgrim's mortal followers was a constant presence in the swallowing darkness.

The walls remained uniformly smooth, but distant lights swam in their glossy depths. Wheeling like distant galaxies, and just as populous, there was a universe of stars within the walls, Perturabo realised, each one distinct and no two alike.

He wondered what they might represent. Were the shimmers of light a purely aesthetic consideration on the part of the sepulchre's builders or might they serve some unknown function? Could they be a self-repair mechanism, such as possessed by the Cadmean Citadel, an infestation of some lithobiotic parasite or perhaps the remnant of an ancient computational archive? Could this entire structure be a form of data repository, a species record of a once-dominant empire now fallen into decline? Perturabo knew better than anyone the value of the wisdom of the ancients. Hadn't he constructed the *Cavea Ferrum* from the designs of a dead genius?

This labyrinth was constructed from the same principles, its intricacies working in multiple overlapping dimensions at once, and Perturabo understood that firmness of purpose was the best instrument of success when navigating a maze.

That, and the non-Euclidian equations of the Firenzii.

When ancient mathematicians first discovered the dimensions beyond the physical, many a classical scholar had been driven to insanity in his attempts to codify his findings in empirical terms. Thanks to the words encrypted in the secret journal of the Firenzii – the slender volume the Crimson King had helped him decode – Perturabo had learned the secrets of navigating such tempestuous calculus. It was an inexact science, not meant for mortal brains to comprehend, but his cognitive reach was far beyond those lunatic geniuses who had tried and failed to grasp the enormity of the worlds they had glimpsed in dreams and fugue states.

When Perturabo had first climbed to the top of the cliffs of Lochos as a youth and seen the Eye of Terror looking down at him from the other side of the galaxy, he had known instinctively there was a universe beyond its hellish borders, a place of dark miracles and nightmarish wonders. With every decade that passed and every fragment of know-ledge he uncovered, its impossible mechanics became ever more visible and less unknowable. Perturabo had gradually peeled back layer after layer of mystery until the alien mechanisms at its heart lay revealed to him.

The last part of the key had been provided by the discovery of the plans in the Sabellian cremation pit, the final, heretical workings of the Firenzii, and Perturabo had revelled in the white heat of immaterial mathematics and

empyreal geometry as he crafted the impossible routes and impenetrable depths of the *Cavea Ferrum*.

What was at play here was no different.

Worked with a subtlety and grace that was breathtaking, but fundamentally the same.

He kept silent and shut out the echoing sounds around him as he processed the fiendishly difficult calculations that laid bare the workings of the labyrinth. He paid no attention to the matrices of darting light that passed through the walls, the panicked flickers of lambent mist swirling in their depths, nor did he note the passage of time or the insistent clicking of vox-traffic from beyond the sepulchre.

Fulgrim kept close, stealing awed glances at him as he chose each turn in the maze, leading them deeper and deeper into its convoluted depths. Their path took them up and down, through spiralling walkways, back around on themselves and through chambers, tunnels and echoing halls designed to confuse and disorientate. Perturabo kept true to his principles of inter-dimensional calculus and forced his natural instinct for direction to cede control of their course to his intellect. He sensed his brother's frustrations at the labyrinth and his inability to map it in his head. Even boastful Dorn would find it next to impossible to navigate the maze of the *Cavea Ferrum*, let alone this exquisite alien rendition of its myriad complexities.

The path through the maze was elaborate and layered, twisting like a nest of writhing snakes and rearranging around him in relation to their onward passage. With every step, Perturabo felt the gelid sentience at the heart of this world – if it even *was* a world, and he was beginning to have his doubts – becoming ever more focused in its attentions.

Whatever lay beneath them, the dreams of a dormant god or a reactivating cache of sentient weapons, Perturabo knew they didn't have much time until it grew powerful enough to actively resist them. With a sudden self-aggrandising epiphany, Perturabo knew with absolute certainty that he alone in all the galaxy was capable of navigating this labyrinth. Not even Fulgrim's pet guide could have done so. Far from pleasing Perturabo, the thought struck a discordant note of imminent threat.

Fixing points of reference in his mind – spatial, empyreal and mathematical – Perturabo halted their progress at an intersection of four passageways. Each was superficially identical, yet only one offered onward passage.

'Why do we stop?' asked Fulgrim. 'We must be near the heart of the labyrinth

by now.’

‘We are,’ agreed Perturabo. ‘One of these passages will lead us to whatever lies beneath the central dome we saw from outside. The rest lead to eternities of wandering and madness.’

‘But you know which to take?’

‘I do.’

‘Then why do we hesitate?’

‘Berossus,’ commanded Perturabo. ‘Bring me Vohra.’

The thunderous form of Warsmith Berossus hauled the cringing eldar forwards, the push of the Dreadnought’s heavy hammer ungentle. Stealing furtive glances at the behemoth behind him, Karuchi Vohra bowed to Perturabo. The guide looked terrible, thin and wasted, as though the life was being drawn from him with every step he took into the labyrinth.

‘My lord?’ said Vohra.

‘The lights in the walls,’ said Perturabo. ‘What are they?’

‘It is difficult to explain, Lord Perturabo,’ said Vohra. ‘My people do not craft walls of stone and steel as you do.’

‘Yes, you *grow* your structures from some bio-polymer,’ said Perturabo. ‘I’ve brought more than one to ruin over the centuries. But answer the question. What are the lights in the walls?’

‘What does it matter how this place is built?’ snapped Fulgrim before Vohra could answer, eager to be moving on.

‘It matters because I say it matters,’ said Perturabo, taking hold of Karuchi Vohra’s robe and easing him forwards to stand facing the four onward passages. Each was dark, with nothing to differentiate them from the hundreds of others they had travelled.

‘Which one?’ said Perturabo, resting his hand lightly on Vohra’s shoulder.

‘My lord?’

‘Which one?’ repeated Perturabo. ‘We are almost at the heart of the sepulchre, so I want you to tell me which of these passages will lead us there.’

Karuchi Vohra glanced nervously back at Fulgrim, as Perturabo knew he would, before hesitantly lifting his arm and pointing to the passageway second from the left.

‘That one,’ said the eldar.

‘Wrong,’ said Perturabo, snapping Vohra’s neck.

The sense of claustrophobia in the Iron Warriors stronghold had been

overpowering, and Julius Kaesoron's innards squirmed to be free of his body with every moment he'd paced its bland, steel-edged courtyard. Like a caged raptor, he was not suited for confinement or to remain static behind high walls. A wise man had once told him that stagnation was death, and that was never truer than of the Emperor's Children.

The Lords of Profligacy had lifted the suffocating veils of the mundane from their eyes and shown them unlimited worlds of sensation and indulgence. Undreamed vistas of excess in all things: noise, music, bloodshed, hedonism, torture, violence, adoration and most of all, worship. Every second not spent indulging desires declared taboo in an earlier age was a waste of life, and Julius Kaesoron had long since declared that no act of indulgence would remain beyond his grasp.

Leaving the dull-minded Iron Warriors behind their impermeable walls, Julius led his three thousand warriors into the plaza before the sepulchre, leaving them to desecrate and destroy as they saw fit. Julius revelled in the sensation of untapped power he felt seeping up into the world like oily water in sodden sand. He bludgeoned crystalline statues and smashed the glowing stones against his skull, grinding the crushed fragments into the cuts in his skin.

The anticipatory pleasure was almost as great as the indulgence, and his altered sight perceived the lines of force and memory that threaded every structure on this planet. He marvelled that the Iron Warriors couldn't see it, and almost pitied them their limited perceptions. How intolerable their lives must be, restricted to seeing only the functional building blocks of what was deemed *reality* by their own stunted senses.

Julius and his warriors circled the Iron Warriors fortress, thousands of whooping and yelling maniacs holding weapons and war banners high. The energy saturating this world was on the verge of release; like a volcano on the brink of eruption or a singer approaching a high note. He wished he could puncture whatever was holding it back, letting its bounty flow through the streets like a surge tide to drown them all.

He laughed hysterically, drawing his combat knife and plunging it up into the space beneath his skin-draped shoulder guard and scored breastplate. The pain was fleeting, the flow of blood momentary, but with every droplet that spilled onto the ground, he felt this world's horror grow.

With a certainty not his own, he understood that his blood was polluted with something wonderful, something intolerable to the race that had built this world. Blood was his devotion, its substance tainted by the force that had ripped its way

to life from the afterbirth of this race's death.

In that instant, he knew what he had to do.

Julius threw aside his knife, its blade too small and inconsequential for what needed to be done. He drew his serrated sword, the blade impregnated with hooked barbs worked along its length. He howled his submission to the kaleidoscopic skies and charged into the chanting mass of his warriors.

His first blow hacked one of Vairosean's Kakophoni in two, blood erupting from the mutant's body like an exploding fuel bladder. His second opened the belly of a warrior whose armour was so torn it should have been discarded long ago. A third beheaded a bullish champion whose neck jetted twin fountains of blood three metres into the air. Julius barged and cut and hacked his way into the Emperor's Children, feeling his certainty that this was the right thing to do with every opened artery, every severed limb and every drop of blood spilled.

He laughed as he saw the Iron Warriors looking on in horror as he slaughtered his brother legionaries, their incomprehension plain even through their flat, expressionless helmets. The stink of blood filled his senses, together with a potent sense of being on the cusp of something magnificent.

Following his lead, the Emperor's Children fell upon one another in an orgy of bloodletting, all cohesion and sense of purpose forgotten in the lustful savagery of killing. Julius remembered the blossoming sense of freedom he'd felt in *La Fenice*, when the avatars of the Lords of Profligacy manifested through the broken shells of mortal bodies. The exquisite pain and ecstatic feeling of being truly *alive* had faded with time, and to feel that again, he would endure any pain, inflict any suffering.

No sooner had he wished for it than he felt a tugging sensation in every cell of his body, a pleading invitation to surrender his flesh.

No, not yet. Let me enjoy this a little longer…

The entire plaza before the sepulchre was now a killing floor, a battlefield with no enemy, just a screaming host of warriors bent on self-destruction.

The Emperor's Children offered themselves up as a willing yet unwitting sacrifice, their blood carrying with it the memory of life and death, birth and doom.

The power at the heart of Iydris spasmed in hateful recognition of that contradiction.

And awoke.

'Brother!' cried Fulgrim as Perturabo dropped Vohra's lifeless body to the floor.

Perturabo ignored his brother's shock and marched in the direction of the leftmost passageway. His warriors moved off with him, the Iron Circle matching his swift stride effortlessly and without complaint. Berossus passed insultingly close to the Phoenician as he strode on.

Fulgrim's hand closed on Perturabo's arm, and he rounded on his brother, his fist balled in anticipation of violence. The Iron Circle turned with a clatter of shields and armaments, every carapace weapon aimed squarely at Fulgrim.

'Do you really have to ask?' demanded Perturabo.

'Ask what?' said Fulgrim, backing away with a look of outrage that made Perturabo sick to his stomach with its theatricality.

'Karuchi Vohra had never set foot on this world before now, had he?' said Perturabo.

Fulgrim's mask finally cracked and he grinned, the liar exposed, the deceiver unmasked.

'I doubt it,' said Fulgrim. 'But even if he had not, does it truly matter?'

'Of course it matters,' said Perturabo, teeth bared. 'Because he couldn't possibly have reached this far into the labyrinth. Yet he claimed to have seen the weapons we seek. How do you explain that, brother?'

Fulgrim shrugged and Perturabo had never wanted to take *Forgebreaker* to a skull more than he did at that moment. He lowered his fist slowly and turned away before his anger got the better of him.

'I knew you were lying to me from the start,' he said. 'But I held onto a shred of hope that there might be a fraction of truth to what you promised. More fool me. I should never have come here with you, brother.'

'No, I needed you to come,' implored Fulgrim, following him, but making no moves to touch him. 'I may have exaggerated some aspects of the eldar legend, but I knew that only you could navigate this labyrinth.'

'So why lie to me? Why create this fiction?'

'Would you have come if I told you I needed you just to unravel a maze?'

'No,' said Perturabo.

'There, you see?'

Perturabo nodded in the direction of the passageway and said, 'So what are we really going to find in here? What could be so important to you that you would expend so many lives and lie to your brother?'

'Exactly what I promised,' said Fulgrim. 'The ability to destroy worlds and lay waste to armies. The power of the Angel Exterminatus lies at the heart of this world, truly, but it will take the two of us to unlock it. No more lies, brother, not

now we are so close to victory.’

Despite himself, Perturabo could feel his curiosity piqued. Fulgrim had lied and cheated and deceived to bring him this far, but he heard no falsehood in this latest declaration. Even so, he didn’t believe his brother’s vacant sincerity.

Whatever lay at the heart of the sepulchre would be Perturabo’s alone.

‘Then we will seize it together,’ he lied.

The carnage being wreaked beyond the strongpoint’s walls was as horrific as it was senseless, and Forrix could only watch in open-mouthed incomprehension as the Emperor’s Children systematically butchered themselves. Warriors who had marched together beneath the same banners now hacked at each other with great broadswords or unloaded entire magazines into their corpses.

The wet sound of steel on flesh and the barking rattle of gunfire filled the plaza. Forrix had no intention of moving aside the Rhinos barring entry to his position to allow those few warriors not partaking in the slaughter back within his walls.

‘What in the name of the Twelve are they doing?’ said Forrix, gripping the steelwork of the battlements with his powered gauntlets. ‘It makes no sense.’

Standing beside him, Vull Bronn shook his head. ‘I have no idea. After what I saw on the *Pride of the Emperor*, I’ve given up trying to figure out any sense in the Third Legion.’

‘But this is so… wasteful!’ shouted Forrix, the metal bending beneath his grip.

‘Did you see what started it?’

‘I don’t know *what* started it, but I know *who*,’ said Forrix, pointing at the blood-drenched figure of Julius Kaesoron as he fought like a demented berserker through those few Emperor’s Children still standing. The captain’s sword was red with entrails and torn flesh, his hysterical screaming like fingernails on slate.

‘Should we try and stop it?’ asked the Stonewrought.

‘You want to get in the middle of that?’

‘Not when I’ve a wall to stand behind.’

‘Then we leave them to it,’ said Forrix. ‘The fools.’

The killing didn’t take long to burn itself out, thousand of lives ended in a convulsion of manic death-dealing. Forrix had never seen anything like it. As silence fell over the plaza, only Julius Kaesoron was left standing, his purple and gold armour entirely covered in crimson and loose, dribbling chunks of skin.

The sword fell from his hand and he slumped to his knees, a plaintive shriek of something dark and primal torn from his throat. The warrior buried his head in

his hands and he fell forwards, as though grovelling to some unseen liege lord.

‘I don’t know why Kaesoron did this, but I’m damn well going to find out,’ said Forrix, descending to the courtyard of the strongpoint and summoning his fellow Terminators to his side. Together with five other towering warriors, he marched to the Rhino gates. With a nod, the two vehicles retracted their bracing footings from the ground and started their engines with a throaty metallic cough.

‘I will be the iron within,’ said the Stonewrought as the Rhinos reversed.

‘As I will be the iron without,’ replied Forrix, leading his warriors beyond the walls.

The gates closed behind them as Forrix marched towards the weeping form of Kaesoron.

The plaza was an abattoir, a charnel house of ripped bodies, emptied bellies and wasted lives. The Iron Warriors gave the dead no reverence, crushing the remains beneath their feet without remorse. With every step they took, Forrix felt the hostility and unseen eyes that had been upon them ever since their landing intensify their scrutiny, as if they were now within easy reach. He halted before Kaesoron, who lifted his head at their approach.

The man’s face was a horror of liquid scar tissue, burned meat and monstrous surgery. Whatever he had looked like before was utterly obscured beneath a leathern mask of self-inflicted mutilations. Kaesoron grinned, exposing rotten teeth, twisted fangs and a lizard-like tongue of reptilian scales.

‘We got their attention,’ he rasped through a mouth clogged with mutant flesh.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The dead,’ rasped Kaesoron. ‘We goaded them and they came. Now the Angel Exterminatus can rise from the ashes of his unmaking.’

‘You killed your own men,’ said Forrix.

‘They weren’t mine,’ said Kaesoron. ‘They never were.’

‘No? Then whose were they?’

Kaesoron seemed to consider the question, tilting his head to the side as though listening for an answer. Then he smiled, and his face pulled apart as the skin folded back on itself, sloughing from his skull.

‘They belong to Slaanesh!’ screamed Kaesoron in revelatory ecstasy.

Forrix recoiled from the name, feeling it stab into him like a curse.

Then, from all around the plaza, Forrix heard a snap and crash of grinding glass. The omnipresent wail that keened on the mournful wind grew to a wounded shriek as thousands of plumes of illuminated smoke erupted from the ground. Forrix and his Terminators immediately formed a defensive circle, auto-

loaders feeding shells into the breeches of combi-bolters.

‘Stand to!’ ordered Forrix. ‘Stonewrought!’

Through the plumes of writhing mist, Forrix saw the surviving crystalline statues throwing off their previous immobility. They moved stiffly, like sleepers awoken from an aeons-long slumber, and the gems at the heart of their bulbous heads bled vibrant colour into glassy bodies that suddenly seemed significantly less fragile. Kaesoron’s warriors had ruined many, but hundreds more remained in the plaza, not to mention the thousands still standing between them and the citadel’s walls.

Forrix felt his heart sink as he saw the titanic guardians of the portal were moving too. Light poured through their enormous limbs from the gemstones set throughout their bodies, and the sweeping, wing-like spines at their shoulders blazed with coruscating energies. Spumes of shimmering light washed from their fists, and the crack and grind of their flexing joints was like the splitting of a glacier.

‘Back to the strongpoint,’ he ordered. ‘Now!’

The lumbering Terminators moved as one, but before they had taken more than half a dozen steps, their way was blocked. Not by the glassy constructs stepping from their plinths, but by an army of spectral warriors coalescing from the emerald-lit mists. Thousands upon thousands of their shimmering forms filled the plaza, clad in form-fitting plates of armour and armed with long blades. White eyes shone through translucent porcelain helmets, and Forrix felt their intense hatred for him.

Though it ran contrary to every secular belief in his head, he understood exactly the nature of this army of wraiths.

These were the eldar dead of Iydris.

TWENTY-TWO

Half-Imagined Horizons

Wraith War

Fire for Effect

Whatever Perturabo had expected to find at the heart of the Sepulchre of Isha's Doom, it wasn't this. He'd expected an array of tombs, grave-markers or some other visible remembrance of the dead. Something literal. He'd expected to see great statuary, monolithic obelisks, grand records of deeds and legacies. Now he realised that was a very human conceit – the eldar remembered their dead very differently.

The last passageway had brought them out onto a walkway thirty metres wide above a vast domed space filled with the same green light that suffused the tombs and mausolea of the city. The ultimate source of that illumination was now revealed, a titanic geyser of brilliant emerald, pouring up in a column of radiance from the opening of an abyssal shaft in the centre of the cavernous space.

High above, instead of the underside of the golden dome they had seen from the outside, was a void of utter nothingness that was at once static and churning with motion. The blazing light from below thundered into its depths, swallowed without disturbing the blackness.

'It's like looking into the heart of a black hole,' said Kroeger, entranced by the sight.

Perturabo nodded, his mind creating recognisable shapes within the fuliginous depths of the blackness: distant horizons, far-off lands and galaxies beyond imagination.

'I think that's exactly what this is,' he said, tearing his gaze from the half-imagined horizons in the dark. 'I think this has something to do with what's keeping the planet from being dragged into the core of the Eye.'

'Then let's try not to do anything stupid in here,' said Falk. 'There's still a war

to be won once we finally get finished with this.’

The floor of the chamber was like a pearlescent seabed; a forest of slender towers, segmented, bulbous and tapering like stalagmites. Each was studded with glittering gemstones that winked in the spuming torrent of light, like barnacle growths on tidal rocks. Winding paths snaked between the towers, the shortest of which was still surely hundreds of metres tall. Though they appeared random, Perturabo immediately saw the pattern in the arrangement of the paths and roadways.

‘They all converge on the opening through which the light pours,’ said Fulgrim.

‘You noticed that?’

Fulgrim gave him a withering look. ‘Perfect patterns, recurrent geometry and naturally occurring Fibonacci sequences? *Please*.’

Perturabo smiled. ‘I forgot you would have read the *Liber Abaci*.’

‘Read it? I rewrote it.’

Perturabo gestured to the interior of the colossal chamber. ‘So is this what you expected?’

Fulgrim strode to the edge of the walkway, his white cloak billowing out behind him like the mane of his hair, which was held back from his face by a silver circlet of exquisite working. Perturabo recognised the same hand that had fashioned the cloak pin Fulgrim had given to him on Hydra Cordatus. He glanced down at the jewel set in the gleaming skull, its blackness now completely eclipsed by gold.

With the Iron Circle formed up around him and his triarchs on either side, Perturabo led them around the circumference of the chamber to where a tightly wound ramp led down to the floor like a coiled serpent draping over the edge of the walkway. Berossus brought up the rear, and as Perturabo descended to the bottom of the ramp, he watched the trailing warriors above him. They had entered the sepulchre with perhaps a thousand legionaries and a similar number of mortals, but now there were considerably fewer among Fulgrim’s followers.

Had the labyrinth claimed them without anyone noticing or had they succumbed to violent urges or carnal desires along the way? Perturabo cared nothing for their fate. Either way, they were as good as dead.

The floor of the chamber was warm like a jungle floor, humid and feathered by wisps of glittering fog that seeped from the towers like breath. Brought to their level, the vast scale of the towers became fully apparent – soaring sculptures that bore no hallmarks of a builder or craftsman. Stark black shadows danced on the

ground and slithered over the towers, the cascading light from the chamber's centre spilling between them like rushing water.

The Iron Warriors marched in lockstep, moving as a single column of martial power, while Fulgrim and his warriors spread out, moving between the towers with their heads turning in awed appreciation of their scale. Fulgrim walked with his arms outstretched and his head tilted back, as though basking in the light of the first dawn. What had begun as a military operation was rapidly descending into something else entirely.

'Whatever these are, they weren't *built*,' said Kroeger, reaching out to touch one of the towers with his fist.

'Don't touch it, you idiot!' snapped Falk.

Kroeger snatched his hand away, the lenses of his helm shimmering with reflected green light and hostility.

'You don't give me orders,' said Kroeger.

'Not yet,' said Falk.

'What does that mean?' barked Kroeger, stepping towards him.

'I don't know,' said Falk, as surprised by his words as Kroeger was angered by them. Perturabo saw Falk glance over at a tight, crystalline knot of gemstones encrusted to the tower at his side as though he saw something, something he wished he couldn't see.

'Falk?' said Perturabo. 'What's wrong?'

Barban Falk didn't answer until Perturabo put a heavy iron gauntlet upon his shoulder.

The triarch flinched as though struck and shook his head, throwing off his momentary lapse of concentration. Perturabo read the warrior's biometrics through his visor and saw his pulse was spiking and his respiratory rate was unusually elevated.

'I… thought I saw something,' he said.

'What?'

'I don't know,' said Falk. 'Nothing, I think.'

'It's this place,' said Kroeger, flexing his gauntlet on the hilt of his sword. 'Gets inside your head. Eldar witchery.'

Falk nodded and clenched his fists.

'I'm fine,' he said. 'Let's go.'

Perturabo led them deeper into the chamber, following the looping paths through the towers. As they drew nearer to the centre and the tower of light, the green mist gathering around the towers grew thicker, like a toxic fog sinking

through the thoroughfares of some industrial hive-sump.

Eventually, as he and Fulgrim had seen, the pathways spiralled in ever decreasing loops until at last they stood before the vertical river of light at the heart of the sepulchre.

It was not solid as they had supposed, more like a cascade of brilliant helices of pellucid light, as though a celestial loom at the planet's core were gathering a billion times a billion radiant threads and weaving them together into one vast stream. The torrent was an intricate mesh of infinite complexity, and Perturabo was not surprised to see that the path they were on led towards the edge of the shaft from which the light rose.

The shaft was two hundred metres in diameter and like this world itself, perfectly circular, without so much as the tiniest imperfection to mar its ideal geometry. Its circumference was cut with cursive symbols, ancient runes beyond even his understanding of language, and Perturabo considered himself fluent in numerous eldar dialects.

Fulgrim marched to the very edge of the shaft, haloed in a corona of emerald light, with his cloak billowing behind him like ivory wings.

'It's so beautiful,' said Fulgrim, turning on the spot to face Perturabo.

Before Perturabo could answer, he heard a cry of alarm. He spun on his heel in time to see a legionary snatched into the mist by an unseen assailant.

'To arms!' he shouted as the mist began coalescing around them.

Screams came from the cloying fog, mortal screams. Bangs of bolter fire sounded, muffled by the mist and weirdly distorted by the unnatural architecture of the chamber. More rattling shots followed, and more screams.

Perturabo saw a starscape of bright lights within the fog, spots of crimson, azure and jade that pulsed with angry illumination. At first he thought it to be nothing more than the gemstones encrusted on the towers reacting to what was happening, but then he saw the tower nearest him… *move*.

No, not move. Reshape.

The material of the tower surrounding a brilliant ruby gemstone set into its flank began to extrude a humanoid shape, like a figure pressed from a mould. It was taller than a Space Marine, but slender and with a bulbous, elongated head, the gemstone borne at its centre. The figure stepped from the tower, trailing lambent light from the residue of its birth. Its arms were clawed, and one bore a slender tube-like device that could only be a weapon of some kind.

Nor was it alone.

Wherever a gemstone was set, similar figures stepped from the depths. Like

automata, but with a hideously organic feel to their movements, they were emerging in their hundreds with every passing second. They drew the mist to them, as though breathing it in, and Perturabo saw with a sinking heart that the chamber was now full of the things.

Thousands upon thousands of them.

'Fulgrim!' shouted Perturabo.

But his brother was nowhere to be seen.

Forrix smashed his fist through yet another of the eldar wraiths, its insubstantial form as vulnerable to damage as any body of flesh and blood. It broke apart in an explosion of light shards and a deathly cry that faded like a lost dream. But just as they could be wounded, so too were they able to cause harm. Forrix's chest was icy cold where one of the wraiths had simply reached *through* his armour to clutch at his heart.

A backhanded blow had dissipated the ghostly essence, but Forrix had not forgotten the lesson. His ring of Terminators ploughed through the ghostly ranks of the eldar, crushing, swiping and tearing at their mist-formed bodies. Three of his warriors were already dead, left behind on the plaza without any obvious wounds upon them.

Julius Kaesoron fought at his side, a hateful presence, but a welcome additional fighter.

Kaesoron's madness may have brought this about, but the man could kill like no other.

Gunfire from the battlements of the strongpoint surrounded them, battering the wraiths from behind iron walls. Mass reactives were rendered impotent, passing through the ghostly bodies of their attackers and exploding on impact with the ground.

'Fists only!' shouted Forrix. 'Save the bolter rounds for the constructs!'

The weapon systems of the *Tormentor* flensed the plaza, sawing arcs of lascannon fire and chugging barks of heavy bolters cutting down constructs by the dozen and vaporising wraiths with every bolt of laser energy. Forrix batted aside a sword blade of mist and light, punching his enormous fist through the shimmering helm of the eldar ghost before him. It vanished with a diminishing scream of loss, but more were there to take its place.

Thunderous streams of light blazed overhead as the Mortis engines duelled with the colossal guardians of the sepulchre. Streaks of cannon fire, plasma comets and flaming ordnance lit the sky in a furious borealis of weapon

discharges. Void shield flares sent arcs of static leaping from every metallic surface. The entire strongpoint was wreathed in tendrils of lightning.

The ground shook as the Titans jockeyed for position between the nearby mausolea. The eldar war machines were faster and blurred with haloed streams of refracted light, but the Mortis engines were belligerent maulers who excelled in close-range brawls.

'Incoming!' cried Kaesoron, with relish.

Moving with spindly grace, the glassy constructs moved unimpeded through the spectral army, their arms blazing with blinding emerald bolts. The majority of them were tearing at the strongpoint, ripping sheets of armour from the walls with their bare hands or unleashing pulsing streams of energy at the warriors upon the battlements, but a vengeful group was rushing towards Forrix and his remaining warriors.

Kaesoron barrelled towards the constructs, his fists mashing into the nearest and breaking it in two. He took a blow to the head that almost toppled him, but he moved with a speed that astonished Forrix. Cataphractii armour offered a warrior many advantages, but speed wasn't normally one of them.

Kaesoron righted himself and crushed his attacker's head between his fists, laughing as he did so, as though now privy to the universe's ultimate joke. He fought like a man possessed, his raw-meat face writhing in the throes of some miraculous transformation.

Forrix put Kaesoron from his mind as another of the smooth-skinned constructs charged him. He met its fist with his own, the two colliding with a searing discharge of polarised energies. He felt the fiery charge race up his arm, but the heavy plates and thick insulation of his armour kept the worst of the pain at bay. It had made the first strike, but that was all it was getting.

Forrix swung his other arm up and fired a stream of explosive rounds into its groin. Glass and light spewed from the wound as they punched through its vitrified body. The thing backed away, but Forrix wasn't about to let it go. He stepped in and thundered his fist into its bulbous head. It staggered, and another blast from his combi-bolter tore the top of its skull off. Another came at him, but a stabbing blast of retina-searing light from the strongpoint's battlements punched into its chest and blew it apart in a storm of molten glass.

Another of his warriors died, his head crushed by an overhand blow from one of the crystal giants. His helmet a flattened ruin, his skull a mass of pulped bone and blood, the body refused to fall – kept upright by the bulk of his armour.

'Get to the gate!' shouted the Stonewrought over the vox. 'I'll be ready to get

you back in.’

A roiling fireball lit the air above the battle, and Forrix risked a glance up as he saw what looked like an enormous pipe or hive conduit fall through the layer of gunsmoke. It took a moment for him to realise he was seeing the shorn length of a Titan’s cannon. The weapon barrel slammed into the ground with seismic force and the deafening crash of its shattering structure echoed like the pealing of the Eternity Bell of Olympia on the day the Legion had first departed its mountainous glory.

Braying warhorns screamed in pain and the electric tang and flare of void shields made the plates of Forrix’s armour twitch.

‘Keep moving, damn you!’ growled Kaesoron, his capricious mood now enraged.

‘I need no lessons from you, Kaesoron!’ barked Forrix, angry it had taken a warrior of the Emperor’s Children to remind him of the fundamental rule of warfare in Cataphractii armour. Movement and momentum were the key. Keep lumbering forwards and there was little that could stop you, but lose that momentum and it would be nigh impossible to regain in the face of enemy fire.

‘I beg to differ,’ spat Kaesoron, punching through the middle of a construct and heading towards the sealed gate of the strongpoint. Forrix followed him, his fist pummelling and his combi-bolter roaring as he stomped forwards.

The last of his warriors was dragged down, overwhelmed by the spectral warriors and their ghostly touch of death. His screams over the vox were silenced in an instant, and Forrix cursed the Phoenician anew for bringing them to this place.

‘Damn you, Kaesoron, and damn *Slaanesh*!’

No sooner had the last name spilled from his lips than his stomach spasmed and his mouth filled with bile. Forrix unsuccessfully fought back a wave of nausea, and sour vomit spurted over his teeth. It pooled before him, choking and acrid, and super-efficient acids ate into his helmet’s systems. Fumes rose from the mechanisms, stinging his eyes.

Blinded, Forrix kept moving and swept his combi-bolter around with the last of his shells. He reached up and tore his ruined helmet free. The sounds of battle surged, booming reports of high-velocity solid rounds, the electric crack of energy weapons and the barking of small-arms fire.

Something enormous exploded nearby. He couldn’t see what. Heat washed over him and he saw the strongpoint silhouetted by a towering mushroom cloud striated with electric blue plasma discharge.

A hand gripped the edge of his breastplate and hauled him onwards. His eyes were streaming, but he saw Kaesoron dragging him to the gateway. Each Rhino reversed enough for them to squeeze through and a roaring blast of bolters and handfuls of grenades were lobbed back outside. The detonations were hardly audible over the crash of war-engine guns overhead.

'Situational update,' he demanded of the Stonewrought, spitting the last caustic mouthful of bile. Flashes of muzzle fire ringed the interior of the strongpoint as the army of wraiths fought to get inside.

'It's bad,' said Soltarn Vull Bronn. 'The fortifications at the wall are under siege on all sides. A mix of the statue creatures and these…' He almost couldn't bring himself to say it. 'Ghosts.'

'Any word from the primarch?'

'None,' said the Stonewrought.

Forrix nodded. 'What about Toramino?'

'No word of any hostilities,' said the Stonewrought. 'Looks like the citadel's getting all the attention, warsmith.'

'Then we might live through this yet,' said Forrix, unclipping a vox-caster from the nearest Rhino.

Perturabo cursed taking his eye from his brother, but knew Fulgrim would have found a way to engineer his scheme no matter what he had done. The creatures oozing from the towers were growing ever more numerous, tightening the ring around the great plume of rushing light.

His Iron Warriors remained at his side, alongside a small cadre of Emperor's Children who stood sentinel at the beginning of the ramp that led down into the shaft. At least the question as to where Fulgrim had gone was answered. The Phoenician's mortal followers, with their bulky containers still strapped to their backs, stood at the very edge of the abyss, their faces alight with the passion of zealotry. He recognised the stuttering movements of Eidolon and the fluid grace of the scar-faced swordsman, Lucius. Scores of Emperor's Children whipped them into place, though there appeared to be no need for violence as the mortals were only too happy in their tasks.

Perturabo had no time to wonder at their actions, and hauled *Forgebreaker* from his back, gasping at the sudden weight of it. Where he could normally bear it with the ease a mortal man might lift a dagger, its weight now seemed to be exponentially greater with every passing moment.

'My lord?' said Barban Falk.

Perturabo shook off his moment of weakness and held the weapon out before him.

‘From iron cometh strength!’ he shouted.

‘*From strength cometh will,*’ returned his warriors.

‘From will cometh faith!”

‘*From faith cometh honour*.’

Perturabo hoisted *Forgebreaker* onto his shoulder and completed the Unbreakable Litany as he charged the foe. ‘From honour cometh iron!’

Five died to his first hammerstrike, six to the next. With the Iron Circle formed up around him, Perturabo was a force of nature. His hammer was death’s instrument and he smashed the enemy to broken shards as it looped around his body in ever wider circles. The weapons mounted on his gauntlet blazed with fire, and he reaped a fearsome harvest of the eldar machine-things.

The Iron Warriors fought shoulder to shoulder, disciplined and unbreakable. Their locked bolters roared with relentless ferocity, smashing the brittle bodies of their enemies to glittering shards. Falk commanded the left, Kroeger the right, and the two flanks were the walls of an impregnable fortress fashioned from flesh and blood.

Berossus smashed the eldar creations apart with every blow, his blitzing cannon, crushing hammer and brutish body unstoppable. Streaking bolts of emerald fire glanced from his casket and flared upon his armoured flanks. Berossus had been a powerful warrior in life, but as a Dreadnought he had ascended to another level of ferocity.

Hundreds of the eldar creatures broke against the iron bulwark, hurled back time and time again until freshly extruded things emerged from the towers with a glowing soulstone at their heart. The Emperor’s Children on the far side of the shaft were under attack, and Perturabo saw that they were protecting the men and women standing behind them.

What was so important about those mortals?

Perturabo’s hammer smashed heads, his fist broke limbs, and his kill tally rose in geometric leaps. Falk and Kroeger fought their own private battles, each warrior in his element as they fought to keep the eldar creatures from their primarch.

Against such overwhelming numbers, Perturabo knew it was a losing battle, but what else was there to do but fight?

His gene-father had always said that a bad plan was better than no plan, and one began to form in his mind as he pushed the eldar ghost machines back again.

The things birthed from the towers were relentless, but individually they were no match for the Iron Warriors. Bathed in the glow of the column of light, Perturabo saw they were insensate things, given animation but without direction other than to attack. They fought without strategy or a plan.

Their only remit was to kill these intruders, no matter how many of them were destroyed in the process. They could be held off for a time, but sheer numbers would eventually win the day for them. Even Perturabo could not fight so many and live, but he realised there might yet be a chance to save something from this debacle.

He stepped back from the fighting lines and, together with the Iron Circle, marched back to the edge of the plunging shaft at the chamber's heart. The Emperor's Children at the ramp lifted their guns at his approach, but Perturabo shook his head.

'Kill them all,' he said.

The robotic warriors of the Iron Circle opened fire, heavy cannons and plasma weaponry punching all but one of the Emperor's Children from his feet. The broken bodies were snatched up by the curtain of light as though caught in the rapids of a fast-flowing river. Perturabo watched their bodies wink out of existence as they were hurled into the blackness above.

Perturabo shot the last warrior with a precise blast from his gauntlet-mounted weapon. He felt no regret at killing the legionary. He had made his choice to stand against Perturabo and that was a death sentence, no matter to which Legion you owed your allegiance. He strode to the edge of the shaft, feeling the almost irresistible power of the emerald light as it thundered through the air towards the singularity above. Fulgrim's remaining followers stared at Perturabo with undisguised hatred, the need for masks of brotherhood shed now that their master's final deception was in effect.

Below, the ramp spiralled down towards a vanishing point, and Perturabo could almost believe that it led to the very centre of the world. Even as the thought occurred, he knew it to be true. That was *exactly* where this would lead him. To the heart of an artificially wrought planet, where the secret of Fulgrim's desire had been hidden from sight since a time before mortal memory.

Perturabo saw Barban Falk coming towards him, knowing what he was going to say before he even heard the words over the vox.

'Save your breath, my son,' he said. 'Where I go, you cannot follow.'

Perturabo stepped into the light, feeling its raging power tugging at his armour as it sought to tear him from the ground. This was not physical force, but the

immutable will of the lives that made up this light, for he now understood that this was no elemental energy or mechanically generated motive force, but the distilled essence of all those who had died here.

And who still remained imprisoned within the glittering gemstones.

This was no abandoned world, it was a repository of the never-dead. Limbo souls whose bodies were no more, but whose spirits endured a twilight existence of incorporeality.

He could think of no crueller fate than to be consigned to such emptiness.

Perturabo descended into the heart of their world.

The guns of the Stor-bezashk trailed streamers of ghostly green corposant, as though a storm were gathering in the clashing skies. Toramino watched his gunmasters and their crews hauling shells from sunken casements, working with machine-like efficiency to ready their weapons to open up.

Forrix had blurted his demand for a final protective fire mission over the vox with breathless haste; a corridor of shelling to link the strongpoint at the sepulchre and the walls of the citadel. A clear zone was to be established between the two fortresses for when the time came to fall back to the landing zone. Toramino recalled that the vox-link had been distorted with static, laced with the unending keening of the wind, thus rendering the triarch's words open to wilful misinterpretation.

A tragic error of communications, but one familiar to any warrior on the battlefield.

He scrolled through the topographical representation of the citadel, its blocky buildings picked out in white, the location of the Iron Warriors strongpoints marked in blue. The points of impact and areas of effect were red dots that expanded into circles of orange then yellow and finally to green.

Red and blue overlapped at the fortification occupied by Forrix and the Stonewrought. Toramino had nothing particular against Soltarn Vull Bronn, and his loss would rob the Legion of valuable insights, but that was a price Toramino was more than willing to pay. With such precise target information, the gunmasters of the Stor-bezashk needed no ranging shots or spotters. Toramino stood at the edge of the battlements, looking out over the smoking outline of the citadel. The shimmering green haze he'd seen on the horizon earlier had bypassed the landing zone, much to his relief, leaving the contravallations untouched. The billowing cloud of swirling shapes and half-glimpsed forms had swept on with unstoppable fury towards the fortifications around the citadel's

wall, where pillars of smoke and leaping columns of fire attested to the ferocity of the fighting within.

The final readiness icon flickered green on his data-slate and Toramino turned back to the multitude of gun barrels raised to the sky. These were his guns, his warriors. The Stor-bezashk answered to him and him alone. Soon they would be the honour guard of a triarch, and with that thought uppermost in his mind, he tapped the blinking red icon on his slate.

‘Fire for effect,’ he said.

TWENTY-THREE

Voices of the Dead

The Glory of the Fallen

The Harvester

The light enfolded Perturabo and he felt the millions of spirits enmeshed in its dense wavelengths and spectra. At least Fulgrim hadn't lied about one thing: a civilisation had ended here, though this was but a fraction of the lives that had been lost in that calamitous fall from grace. He neither knew nor cared what had happened to the eldar. Their doom was of an earlier age, its causes immaterial to him.

That they were declining to their eventual extinction was enough.

The dead of Iydris were still here and their spirits – though he disliked the supernatural connotations of that word – were woven into the substance of the light roaring up from whatever lay at the bottom of this shaft. The horror of their deaths was here too, and Perturabo felt their desperate hunger to imprint its tale upon him. He resisted, for he had other business to be about, but the farther he descended on the circling ramp, the harder they tried. His every step reverberated with echoes that lasted far longer and resonated far deeper than they had any right to, as though he no longer travelled on paths that could ever be mapped.

Though superficially obvious in its course, Perturabo understood that he was travelling a route not meant for humans, one where each downwards step bore no relation to distance in the world above. Glittering diamonds sparked in the walkway, skittering away from his footfalls like tiny crystalline arachnids. The wall next to him was utterly smooth, featureless save for the extrusion of the ground upon which he stood, though Perturabo saw hints of wraith-like forms swimming in its substance. They reached for him, but their essences were trapped within their crystal prison and could not escape.

All sounds of fighting from above had ceased, swallowed by the roar of the

light and the susurration of billions of voices clamouring to be heard. Though he closed his thoughts to their touch, he couldn't shut them out entirely. His mind was fashioned from the gene-structure of the Emperor, with perceptions and sensitivities beyond the comprehension of lesser minds.

The dead of Iydris could feel that and screamed at him with all their might.

Trapped in the heart of the Eye of Terror with only their fellow doomed souls around them, the chance to converse with a mind capable of listening was not to be missed. The dead of an entire world shouted their tales to him, a screaming wail of impenetrable sound. Yet in death, as in life, some voices were louder than others, and Perturabo perceived fragments of their lives.

They spoke of their loves, their dreams and their hopes. Of their loss, their aching loneliness, the fading hopes of their kin returning for them and the fear of that which pressed on the ever-shrinking borders of their doomed world.

But most of all they spoke of the unnatural desires that had driven them deeper and deeper into hedonistic indulgence, the wanton lusts and heedless descents into madness that had undone them. A lifetime of sorrow pressed in on Perturabo, but he fought against their maudlin laments.

'You chose your path to destruction,' he snarled. 'Every one of you brought your deaths upon yourselves and I have no pity for you. You got what you deserved.'

Only as the voices of the dead kept pressing in upon him, telling him of the horror their lives had brought about and the route by which their doom had unfolded, did Perturabo come to understand they were not seeking his pity. They cared nothing for his understanding and his judgement was worthless to them.

The world of dead voices sought no boon from him.

They were warning him.

Beware She Who Thirsts…

Down, ever downwards.

An unending spiral towards a point of light that grew no brighter no matter how far he descended or how fast he strode. He began to doubt the wisdom of his course, but Perturabo had never given up on anything once he had begun, and this would be no different. He wondered how Fulgrim could have got so far ahead of him, but reasoned that time and distance held little meaning in this place.

He would find Fulgrim and he would kill him.

That fact alone sustained Perturabo as the voices of the dead became ever

more insistent. He marched onwards, forcing himself into a kind of fugue state to keep his thoughts his own. His limbs moved mechanically; one foot in front of the other, ever downwards. Deeper and deeper.

The upper reaches of the plunging shaft were soon lost to sight in the haze of streaming light, but whatever lay at the bottom drew no closer. He thought back to the cliffs of Lochos, remembering a similar feeling as he climbed towards the unknown future at the top. But he had reached the top of that cliff, just as he would reach the bottom of this shaft.

He wondered if he would make that same climb again, knowing what he knew now, that only betrayal, bitterness and pain lay above him.

Might it not have been better to let go of the cliff and plunge to his death? Would it not have been easier to let his brains be dashed out on the rocks below? To be spared the cold, cheerless years to adulthood, without friends and kind words. Insulted by tutors whose teachings he mastered and surpassed in a matter of days, and mistrusted by a surrogate father who had cursed him the day he left his side to join his gene-sire in the stars.

Easier, yes, but easy had never been Perturabo's way.

Long is the way, and hard, that leads out of hell and up to light.

The last remaining fragments of a proscribed book that had found its way into Perturabo's personal library, but truer than even its lost writer could ever have known.

And from Olympia, what then?

A century and more of war, where his sons had broken their backs on countless worlds, bringing the strongholds of system tyrants and alien dominators to ruin. Campaign after campaign, battle after battle, each more gruelling than the last, each hope of a war of manoeuvre or a war of marching formations cruelly dashed by fresh tasking orders to resistant systems that knew the science of fortress-building better than most.

'Perturabo throws men at walls,' Dorn had once said of him. 'If the Araakites so much as thought a wall he would pelt it with our legionaries as if there were no other way.'

The words had been said in jest, grim humour in the wake of a costly war of compliance in the Araaki Spiral, to imply shared adversity, but Perturabo hadn't seen any of Rogal Dorn's golden warriors up to their necks in mud and shit in the trenches. The Araakites had known their craft, and every stronghold was dug in deep around narrow passes, remote hilltops and natural barriers in the landscape. The system rock was bitter and hostile, the enemy warriors no less so,

and it had taken many years for the IV Legion to regain its former strength.

Great works of art and heroic verse were composed in the wake of the victory, celebrating the courage of the Imperial Fists, the Dark Angels and the White Scars, but nowhere in the reams of poetry or artwork were the grim labours of the Iron Warriors judged worthy of note. Only in a predella to a larger work of Kelan Roget had warriors of the IV Legion even been shown, a lone Apothecary removing the gene-seed of a dying legionary as the flag of the Fists flew over a captured fortress.

The Glory of the Fallen it had been called, and Perturabo had sought out the artist so he could procure the piece for himself. Roget had been thrilled at his interest, but his pleasure had turned to dismay as Perturabo put it to the torch.

'If my sons are not to be honoured properly then they will not be part of a record that glorifies another,' Perturabo had told the horrified artist as the flames consumed the painting.

Perturabo heard afterwards that Dorn had offered a rich commission for the artist to repaint the predella, but Roget had declined. At least one mortal understood him. He hadn't thought of that moment in decades, and knew that the voices of the dead were pushing his thoughts to days gone by, forcing him to relive his own path if he would not listen to theirs.

'No man can buy back his past,' he told the light. 'So I'll waste neither breath nor thought upon it.'

The journey downwards was never-ending, or so it seemed until it ended.

Perturabo had tuned out the dead, heeding their warnings while at the same time ignorant of their substance. Grim tales of their mistakes and follies did not interest him and only that curious phrase – *Beware She Who Thirsts* – had lodged in his mind like a buried splinter.

He had never heard of any such being, nor could he divine anyone who might fit such a description. Females had been few in number within his Legion's expeditionary fleets, and virtually non-existent since he had purged the remembrancers from his ships. Any woman worthy of such a title would certainly have been known to him.

The levelling-out of the walkway caught Perturabo by surprise, his steps faltering as he realised he'd reached the bottom of the shaft. He looked up, the vague diaspora of his thoughts cohering into his singular purpose in taking this downward path. He unhooked *Forgebreaker* from his back, not surprised to find that the physical geometry of where he had arrived bore no relation to the route

he had taken to reach it.

He stood at the origin of a slender bridge that arched out to the centre of a spherical chamber of incredible, sanity-defying proportions. The footings of the bridge were anchored on the equator, and a score of other bridges reached out to where a seething ball of numinous jade light blazed like a miniature sun. Its dimensions were impossible to guess, for the chamber itself was beyond anything he had dreamed possible.

Iydris, it transpired, was a hollow world, its core this colossal void with the impossibly bright sun at its heart. The shadows of the bridges danced on the inner face of the void, in which were set innumerable gemstones like those that guarded the surface. This was the source of the light, and of the voices that had plagued him on his descent with their tedious woes.

The curving walls were of a smoky, fire-veined stone, hued green by the fixed sun. The gems set within the inner faces of this spherical realm formed a firmament of stars, billions of glittering points of light that surrounded him above and below. Perturabo took a step out onto the bridge, looking down past its edges to the shimmering stones in the gloom, like bioluminescent creatures of the deep ocean slowly rising to the surface. His step faltered as a previously unknown sense of vertigo seized him.He took a moment to regain his equilibrium, slowing his breathing and letting his sense of spatial geometry recalibrate to the sheer vastness of the space in which he found himself. Perturabo walked out onto the bridge, no more than a metre in width and no thicker than an insubstantial treatise. Like the others around the chamber, it sloped on a gentle upward arc, the curve corresponding to the outer edges of the golden ratio.

Like the walkway that had brought him here, his steps covered distance with no regard for the physical laws of the universe, and the enormity of the green sun became apparent as he drew near the exact centre of Iydris. Perturabo kept his eyes fixed forwards, seeing a wavering silhouette against the incandescence ahead of him.

Fulgrim stood upon an elliptical platform at the terminus of the bridge, basking in the radiance of the sun’s energy. Perturabo made no attempt to soften his tread, knowing Fulgrim would already be aware of his approach.

‘This is what you came here for?’ said Perturabo. ‘This is the Angel Exterminatus?’

Fulgrim turned and his smile of welcome was so utterly genuine that Perturabo briefly entertained the notion that perhaps he was mistaken in thinking he had

been betrayed.

‘No, this is nothing,’ grinned Fulgrim, shaking his head. ‘Alien necromancy, nothing more.’

‘So there never were any weapons?’

‘Not as your stunted intellect would understand it, no.’

‘And the Angel Exterminatus? It doesn’t exist either, does it?’

‘Not yet, brother,’ said Fulgrim. ‘But with your help, it soon will.’

Fulgrim laughed at his bemused expression, cruel even in victory. ‘Even after the bleating warnings of the eldar, you still don’t understand.’

‘Then illuminate me,’ said Perturabo, hefting his hammer onto his shoulder.

‘It’s me,’ said Fulgrim. ‘*I* am to be the Angel Exterminatus.’

The strongpoint was an island of iron amid an ocean of ghostly green wraiths and their glass-limbed counterparts. For all that their bodies were insubstantial, some immutable essence of the life they once lived or some unknown quality of the Iron Warriors defences kept them from simply passing through the solid matter of the modular fortress.

Razorwire tore smoky matter from their bodies and physical trauma destroyed them as surely as a living foe. They could not penetrate the walls on their own, but the energy blasts of the wraith-constructs could put them asunder for the wraiths to breach. Their weightless forms could climb the riveted iron of the walls and storm the ramparts, and their hands could tear the heart from a warrior even through the protection of his warplate.

Forrix smashed his fist through the glass-domed helm of a tall construct as it clambered over the smoking, molten ruin of a destroyed Rhino making up part of the eastern wall. A blast of combi-bolter fire punched through the back of its head. He stepped back over the shattered remains of three of its brethren, letting Iron Warriors in power armour take his place.

Their guns shredded the gathering wraiths that pushed their way into the breach.

‘Stonewrought,’ he voxed, moving to stand in the shadow of *Tormentor* on its raised central plinth. ‘Eastern breach contained.’

The Shadowsword was confined to being a static weapons platform while the assault of the wraith army continued. The strongpoint would need to be dismantled before it could drive out, but with its many guns flaying the eldar attack, there was little need to expose it to the enemy’s close-range attention.

‘Some of those constructs coming for the gate,’ answered Vull Bronn. ‘Big

ones.’

The Stonewrought fought from the upper hatch of the *Tormentor*, manning its cupola reaper cannon with steady traverses and directing the fire and deployment of the warriors on the ramparts.

‘Come on, Toramino,’ snarled Forrix. ‘Get those Stor-bezashk of yours breaking a sweat!’

Deafening blasts of warhorns and the slam of heavy glass limbs echoed from the walls of the citadel as the Mortis engines and the eldar Titans did battle somewhere nearby. Snatches of vox-echoes from nearby legionaries suggested to Forrix that only *Mortis Vult* was still in the fight, but he expected no aid from the Reaver unless it was somehow able to inflict engine kills on both eldar ghost machines.

On each of the strongpoint’s four walls, warriors in burnished iron, gold and jet fought the dead of Iydris with relentless, machine-like precision. Each warrior knew his role in the battle and with all of them working as one, their defence was unbreakable. Their bolters were firing down into the plaza in sequential volleys. As one warrior exhausted his magazine, he would step back from the firing line to reload as his brothers closed ranks.

For now, Forrix and a company-strength detachment were acting as a mobile reserve, plugging the gaps. Though he was all that remained of this detachment’s Terminator contingent, one warrior so clad was a force multiplier not to be taken lightly. So far he and his men had sealed five breaches and prevented twice as many line breaks.

Watching the indomitable fortitude of his Legion brothers on the ramparts, Forrix was reminded of the clockwork automatons the Lord of Iron built in the early days of the Crusade. He remembered a golden lion that was to be presented to the master of the Dark Angels, but which had never been finished, a bronze horse that had been designed for a great centrepiece at Nikaea and never used and a celestial timepiece that Guilliman had mounted on the tallest tower of his Temple of Correction on Macragge.

The Iron Warriors made war a thing of beauty, a science that was as magical as any lurid tales of bloody courage and heroism told by the likes of the *Vlka Fenryka* or the riders of Chogoris.

Neon bolts of energy flailed around the fortress, battering its structure and punching through previously weakened points. The vehicles’ damage-reduction mechanisms fought to repair the impacts, but the onboard components for achieving full functionality had long since been expended. The inner faces of the

strongpoint were heaped with Legion dead, their bodies punched clean through by the plasma weapons of the enemy or torn open by ethereal claws.

Yes, the Iron Warriors were fighting like a well-oiled machine, but its component parts were being worn down. At current rates of attrition, the last round would be fired from a bolter within the next three minutes.

Forrix lumbered over to the gateway of Rhinos as a blast of blue-hot energy punched out of the crew compartment of one. Metal exploded outwards, molten droplets of adamantium and plasma residue dribbling to the ground. The two Rhinos boomed and rocked back under a terrific impact. Another blow and the stricken vehicles slammed back as though they had been struck by a siege Titan's wrecking ball.

The skidding tank spun around as though on ice, heading straight for him.

Forrix braced his shoulder and leaned into the impact.

The Rhino slammed into him, its momentum almost unstoppable.

Almost.

Terminator armour turned a warrior into a man-portable tank, and matched with the cold iron of Forrix, the Rhino was going to come off worst. The vehicle buckled, stopping dead, and Forrix pushed it back the way it had come. Two of the eldar constructs, each twice as tall as a legionary, punched through the gateway, their limbs ablaze with emerald fire.

One staggered as the Rhino crashed into it. The weight of the vehicle broke its legs and it went down beneath the Rhino. Forrix charged the other, his gait ponderous but inexorable. The construct saw him coming and levelled its arm at him, a slender limb ending in a long-barrelled lance-like weapon.

Forrix could not hope to avoid the blast and steeled himself to fight through the impact.

Pulsing streams of energy slammed into him and Forrix yelled in pain as the plastron of his armour was shredded by the quickfire blasts. Fiery heat enveloped his chest, and but for the rigidity of his battle-plate, he would have fallen. The backwash of searing heat from the weapon melted away his vulcanised cowl and dragged the air from his lungs.

Forrix gasped for breath, knowing he could not survive another blast.

The tip of the construct's weapon powered up to fire again, but before it could kill him, a streaking white contrail flashed overhead and struck it in the centre of its elongated head. The *Tormentor*'s hunter-killer missile detonated with a thunderclap and the construct was burned to liquid in the blink of an eye, its death scream cut short.

Forrix turned his head and saw the Stonewrought with his shoulder bent to the auxiliary launch tube on the *Tormentor*'s turret.

'Fine shot, Stonewrought,' said Forrix, pointing over Vull Bronn's shoulder as a towering shadow engulfed the strongpoint. 'But there's a better target for you.'

Emerging from the rogue thermals and swirling vortices of smoke on the northern side of the strongpoint was the last eldar Titan. Its upper carapace bled light from the damage it had taken, and one spine-wing hung broken at its shoulder. It limped from a wound that gushed light in its leg, and was surely on the verge of dissolution. Both Mortis engines must have been put down, but they had clearly given a good account of themselves. The towering machine's one remaining arm was a monstrously oversized variant of the weapon that had almost killed Forrix a moment before, and he knew that one shot would wipe them from the face of the planet.

The Stonewrought dropped into the *Tormentor* and the enormous turret immediately began to grind around on powerful servos. The barrel of the main gun elevated, a Phaeton-pattern volcano cannon. A Titan-killer.

Forrix didn't move. He saw little point.

Whoever fired first would kill the other; the brutal arithmetic of war at its simplest.

Before either the Titan or the Shadowsword could fire, Forrix heard the unmistakable sound of incoming ordnance. He spun around and saw arcing lines of massed artillery fire streaking through the lower reaches of the atmosphere before nosing over and streaking towards the earth.

'About bloody time, Toramino,' he said.

'You're the Angel Exterminatus?' said Perturabo, not knowing whether to laugh at his brother's self-aggrandisement or stoke his rage with the arrogance of it. 'You always did have an appetite for rampant narcissism, but this is the grandest delusion yet.'

Fulgrim spread his arms wide and let the seething tempest of the rising light billow his cloak out behind him. The light of the green sun haloed his head and limned his body in sickly radiance.

'I don't expect you to understand, brother,' said Fulgrim, and it took Perturabo a moment to realise his brother was no longer standing on the ground, but slowly rising to float above it. 'For the devotee of a long-dead man of feverishly inventive imagination and unquenchable curiosity, I imagine you would have made a poor pupil. You lack vision, brother dear, you always have. But what

should we expect from a grubber in the dirt? Your nose always pressed to the mud, what chance did you have of grasping the rapturous horizons within our reach?'

Perturabo moved towards Fulgrim, but he had taken only a step when his brother spoke a single word. Its nightmare syllables tore at Perturabo's brain like a barbed awl driven through his ear and into the heart of his skull. He stumbled, dropping to one knee as his nervous system shrieked in pain.

He pushed himself back to his feet, gritting his teeth against the grinding of his bones and the creak of every sinew as it threatened to snap.

'Impressive, brother,' said Fulgrim in surprise. 'There are few who can resist the true name of the Profligate One.'

Fulgrim's words made no sense, but Perturabo didn't need to understand his brother to kill him. He kept on through the pain, each step a battle he wasn't sure he could win. The weariness that had kept him aching and sporadically weak returned to stab him with draining force. *Forgebreaker* now felt like a dead weight on his shoulder and he had to fight for every breath, his lungs being crushed within his chest.

'You are mighty, Perturabo, the mightiest of us all, perhaps,' said Fulgrim with real admiration in his voice. 'I suspect that is why it took the *maugetar* stone so long to drain enough of your strength.'

'The… *harvester*?' said Perturabo, his grasp of the eldar tongue fading and sluggish.

'My gift to you,' said Fulgrim, pointing a slender finger to Perturabo's chest, where the golden gemstone at the centre of the skull-carved cloak pin now pulsed with its own internal heartbeat. 'Your faculty with labyrinths was not the only reason it had to be you.'

'Why what had to be me?' hissed Perturabo, knowing his brother's need to inflate his own ego would buy him some time.

'A sacrifice is only a sacrifice if what is offered is valued greatly,' said Fulgrim. 'And your strength is valued *very* greatly. By me and the Warmaster. Horus will be angry, of course, but when he sees what I have become, he will realise the value of your death.'

'You intend to kill me?'

Fulgrim gave him a faux-regretful grin. 'That *is* rather the point of a sacrifice.'

'Why? What do you think to gain by it?'

'Ah,' said Fulgrim, lifting his arms until they were outstretched to the glittering starscape of embedded gemstones. 'Do you remember how I told you

that many secrets had been revealed to me?'

Perturabo nodded, fighting to overcome the crushing lethargy wrapping his limbs in leaden weights. Fulgrim's grin threatened to split his face, maniacal and hungry.

'I told you I would share those secrets with you one day and that they would bring us closer than ever. Today is that day,' said the Phoenician, and Perturabo sank to his knees as jolting pain surged through his body. It felt as though his heart had been pierced by a surgeon's lance that was slowly draining him of his vital essence.

'I am not the same person you knew, brother,' said Fulgrim drifting towards him through the air. 'Even before Isstvan I was changing, though I did not know it. It began on Laeran, but I suppose that's not important to you. The race that called that oceanic rock home worshipped beings I mistook for invented species memory from their earliest prehistory, but I was wrong, brother. Their gods were real. Very real.'

'Gods?'

Fulgrim waved away the pejorative associations. 'Entities so powerful they might as well be called gods. They are to mankind as we are to microbes: towering and immortal, magnificent and all-powerful.'

'A microbe can still kill in great enough numbers,' pointed out Perturabo, but Fulgrim ignored him.

'Such entities dwell in the roiling depths of the warp and in return for power beyond imagining all they demand is devotion. One such being craved my body and, for a time, claimed it as its own to wreak great harm in my name.'

Fulgrim's features twisted in distaste, as though an argument raged in his flesh all the way down to the cellular level.

'As this creature learned of me, I too learned of it and discovered how to fight it. We struggled for mastery of my flesh, and eventually reached a form of… *compromise*.'

Perturabo heard the scorn in that last word, knowing any kind of half-measures were anathema to the Phoenician.

'I regained control of my body, but the touch of a creature of Chaos is a wound that never heals, stigmata that forever bleed. Without its presence I could never reach the exultant highs of perfection. No matter what I did, a piece of me was always left… *wanting*. I was a vessel that could never be filled, an itch never scratched, a hunger never satisfied. So I resolved to become like it. And here we are.'

‘And where is that?’

‘Here,’ said Fulgrim, clenching his fists and drawing his arms back towards his chest.

Perturabo heard a million cracks of what sounded like splitting bone, and the shimmering lights above him *shifted*. It seemed as though the far distant walls of the chamber were moving, and moments later he saw why.

At first it was like an approaching fog, like the dimly perceived movement of the galaxy’s outer spirals, but then Perturabo saw that it was something infinitely worse. Every single gemstone that had been set within the walls was hurtling towards the green sun blazing at Fulgrim’s back.

The glittering stones sped towards them like bullets, but the instant before impact, Fulgrim extended his palms and they ceased their forward movement, forming a sphere of shimmering gems around the sun. Only the upper reaches of the sphere remained open, through which Perturabo could see only darkness.

Was it just his fading sight or was the light of the sun diminishing? Like a star that had exhausted its inner reserves of fuel, the green star was collapsing into its doom. Its surface raged as it fought for existence, but it was a fight Perturabo could see it was destined to lose.

He slid *Forgebreaker* from his shoulder and with its head resting on the ground, pushed himself upright once more.

‘On your knees or on your feet, it makes no difference to what is going to happen,’ said Fulgrim.

‘It matters to me,’ said Perturabo, though the effort of speaking was almost too much for him. ‘If I am going to die, then I’ll do so standing up.’

‘I will miss you, brother,’ said Fulgrim, reaching down to pluck the golden stone from the silver skull at Perturabo’s breast. He set it within a cavity worked into the eagle upon his own breastplate, and sighed, like a slave to narcotics experiencing the bliss of the needle.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Fulgrim as the first faint threads of black streaked the stone. ‘Yes, it could be no other than you.’

Fulgrim stepped close to embrace him, a dreamy smile on his lips.

Perturabo felt sick at Fulgrim’s touch, but he barely had the strength to draw breath, let alone push him away. Fulgrim kissed both his cheeks and looked up with a rapturous expression on his face.

A glittering rain of broken glass was falling into the sphere, shards of crystal torn from the bedrock of another world and dropped into the upper reaches of the plunging shaft. This was what Fulgrim’s mortal followers had carried into the

sepulchre on their backs.

‘And he shall build a glorious city of mirrors,’ said Fulgrim, radiant tears spilling from his eyes. ‘It shall be a city of mirages, at once solid and liquid, at once air and stone.’

Perturabo could not speak as Fulgrim pulled him tight to his breast once again.

‘Come, brother,’ said the Phoenician. ‘Let us ascend!’

And, so saying, Fulgrim and Perturabo flew back to the surface like entwined shooting stars, with millions of screaming gemstones trailing behind them in a glittering comet’s tail.

TWENTY-FOUR

Iron on Iron

Legacy of Blood

A Hard Fight

The *Tormentor* fired first, but in the end it didn't matter, the strongpoint was destroyed anyway. The volcano cannon's ignition recoil hurled the tank back on its raised platform, breaking the restraint couplings holding it in place with whipping cracks of high-tensile steel. Flailing cables snapped out, slicing through Iron Warriors by the dozen, their warplate no protection against such force.

Designed as a Titan-killer, the Shadowsword's main gun was the deadliest weapon capable of being mounted on a tank. Its powerful laser could smash through the thickest armour, batter down layered void shields and deliver kinetic impact and explosive force greater than any other weapon in the Imperial arsenal, save those of the Titans themselves or the mighty Martian Ordinatus.

At close range, with its holo-fields useless and its hardened carapace bleeding cracks of light from the brawl with the Mortis engines, the eldar Titan had no chance.

Its upper torso simply vanished in a blaze of streaming light and shattering crystal. Absolutely nothing was left of the soaring war machine above its rotating hip-gimbals. It rocked back on the ruins of its legs, which swiftly became opaque as it haemorrhaged light like the final artillery salute at the Triumph of Ullanor. Cracks spread through the glassy substance of its remains, which collapsed down into itself like a sculpture made of ash.

Forrix let out a shuddering breath, but his elation was short-lived as he heard the steelwork and reinforced supporting elements of the *Tormentor*'s platform buckle under the hideous stresses the volcano cannon's recoil had inflicted. The structure had never been designed with any thought to the super-heavy's main gun being fired, and now that short-sightedness was about to prove costly.

With a creaking groan of disintegrating supports, the back portion of the platform began to keel over, falling with exponential swiftness as each member failed in a cascade of collapse. The super-heavy tilted, its powerful engine revving and the tracks grinding to gain purchase as the driver fought to slow their descent.

The *Tormentor* slammed down, the tracks hitting the ground already in motion. The toothed edges ripped up the rock, hurling chunks of broken stone throughout the compound, but instead of burying itself in the ground, the motion of the tracks pulled it along, and the front end of the massive tank slammed down intact.

The prow of the tank slewed around, and Forrix saw what happened next in slow motion. Hitting at an oblique angle, the Shadowsword roared around in a tight arc, the armoured flanks rushing towards him like an oncoming wall. Though he knew he couldn't possibly outrun it, Forrix turned to get out of the wild spin of the madly revving track units.

The collision was like being kicked by a Titan, and Forrix felt the plates of his armour crumple, his onboard systems smashed beyond useless. Forrix rolled, sky and earth trading place many times before he finally skidded to a halt at the end of a trench his fall had gouged.

He struggled to catch his breath. He couldn't move. The enmeshed nervous system controlling the fibre-bundle musculature of his armour was shattered. Only his own strength would move the heavy plates of armour now.

Forrix looked up as he heard the unmistakable whine of artillery shells. Toramino's barrage was inbound, but a lifetime spent in the trenches watching streaks of explosive ordnance passing overhead had given Forrix a sixth sense as to the trajectory of any fire mission.

'Blood of Olympia!' he swore, pushing himself onto his side with a desperate heave.

The first shells landed seconds later, slamming down with percussive booms of earth-shaking force. Forrix was knocked flat as the north-east corner of the strongpoint vanished in a crescendo of noise and fire. Bodies tumbled from the wreckage, Iron Warriors bodies, missing limbs, missing heads, fused into armour burned black or simply atomised.

Whickering shrapnel spanked Forrix's armour and he spun away, keeping his head low and letting the buckled backplate take the worst of the blast. The shockwave almost knocked him to the ground, but he kept low and braced himself with his fists. The noise and air pressure was incredible, and Forrix's

eardrums ruptured instantly as the breath was sucked from his lungs by differential waves.

Yet more shells landed, this time obliterating the gateway and leaving a fifteen-metre crater between two broken stubs of wall section.

More corpses. Blood misted the air, body parts fell in a rain of blackened flesh. Broken plates of armour bounced and ricocheted like razored axe blades. The western walls vanished in a sheeting wall of flame, followed by the southern ramparts. Falling debris hammered down around him: a bouncing helmet with the ragged stump of a neck protruding, a mangled bolter and a chainsword with a blade of yellow and black chevroning.

His warriors were dying. Murdered.

Intersecting shockwaves pounded through Forrix's body, shaking him like a rag doll and churning his genhanced anatomy. Only the ablating plates of his ruined armour saved his internal organs from liquefying entirely.

'Cease fire!' shouted Forrix. His voice sounded very far away.

He had no idea if his vox was even functional.

'Iron on iron! Cease fire! Iron on iron!'

But the shelling continued unabated.

More and more rounds were falling, a radial bombardment pattern Forrix knew was centred on the strongpoint. A huge shape loomed from the mist before him, a roaring iron monster of thunder and noise. The vox sparked at his gorget, but he couldn't hear anything beyond the muffled ringing and deadened whine of the blast-deafened.

The monster was coming to kill him.

It was the great beast of iron he had always known would one day kill him, ever since the oracle of Lochos had told him so as a boy. A childish fear, put away as a man, now rekindled in the face of its truth. Its great black maw opened and swallowed him whole, taking him down into a red-lit belly that stank of oil and machinery.

The shelling pounded the plaza to destruction. It struck the ground before the sepulchre over and over again with unrelenting impacts, utterly obliterating everything living, dead or somewhere in-between. Smoke and lung-blisteringly hot air tore through the shattered remains of the strongpoint until nothing was left standing.

No stone upon another, no iron bound to iron, no heart still beating.

Glowing shards of glass showered Kroeger as he swung his chainblade low

through the legs of an eldar construct. The creature toppled onto its side, streaming light from its shorn legs and breaking into thousands of pieces as it fell. Kroeger stamped down on the gemstone that fell from its skull-helm, relishing the sense of finality in its destruction. He fought with rapid, controlled movements, his sword always in motion, his pistol stabbing out with every shot as though to give each round more force as it killed.

The fighting was all up close and personal, the eldar ghost warriors pushing them ever closer to the edge of the plunging shaft at the centre. Kroeger could feel the pounding pressure of the light geysering from far below, but kept his attention fully on the relentless horde of crystalline foes.

Though he had seen Perturabo issue no command, the Iron Circle had split themselves into two forces, one assigned to each of the two triarchs. Barban Falk fought to Kroeger's right, with three battle robots protecting his flanks and rear, and Kroeger likewise had three of the Colossus alongside him. The automatons were not fast, nor were they especially skilled, but their shields pounded the eldar machines to broken shards with every blow and the chugging, booming thud of their shoulder cannons was enough to keep all but the luckiest enemies at bay.

Behind him, on the far side of the shaft, the Emperor's Children waged their own war, fighting as though they expected reinforcements at any minute.

Kroeger's inattention almost cost him dearly. A searing beam of emerald light struck him on the shoulder, spinning him around and causing him to lose his balance. An enemy warrior took advantage of his momentary distraction and fell upon him with a clubbing fist. The blow slammed into the side of his helm, fogging his visor with red warnings and crazing his vision with crackling traceries. He emptied his pistol into its chest as another creature battered him into the air with a sweeping, underhand blow. Kroeger slammed down at the edge of the shaft, losing his pistol as it skittered over the edge. The torrent of light pulled at him, like the hands of drowned ghosts trying to drag him into their watery grave.

Kroeger fought them, rolling clear as a heavy, crystalline foot slammed down where his head had been. He stabbed up with his sword, the blade shearing along its inner leg to its groin. Revving teeth bit home, spraying Kroeger with glass chips, and he wrenched his sword back, knowing he wouldn't get another strike before it hurled him into the light.

Enraged at the thought of dying at the hands of an artificial being, Kroeger loosed a primal, animal howl and sprang forwards, tackling the creature and

grappling its torn-up limbs. One leg split, a crack gushing with howling light, but the other held firm. Before he could strike again, a blow from an energy-wreathed sword broke the creature in half at the waist. Kroeger pushed himself to his feet, a red veil of anger blinding him to everything except the need to *kill*.

He swept up his own sword and brought the screaming blade down upon the nearest skull, a steeldust grey helm with a chevroned visor. It split apart and a jet of blood shot out, half a ruined head shorn away in a wash of crimson and grey matter.

Harkor didn't fall immediately, but stood frozen in the act of killing the eldar construct, his sword arm extended before him, his half-face almost comical in its expression of shock.

Kroeger didn't care that he had killed his lieutenant. That he had killed was enough.

Another of his robots went down with a crash of inert machinery, its shield a molten mass of blistered metal, its chest a crater of burned plasteel, fused bio-organic polymers and boiled dribbles of coolant.

Twin blasts of alien energy punched into Kroeger's chest, but he didn't feel the pain of his seared flesh, the heat-detonation of two ribs nor the flash-burn of his inner anatomy. He swung his sword again, bisecting an eldar construct and carrying the blow onwards into the faceplate of another. Their inset gemstones cracked and died and Kroeger roared with savage joy to see them brought low. Taking hold of his sword in a two-handed grip, Kroeger waded into the eldar, hewing left and right. He saw Falk and Berossus, but paid their fights no mind; all that mattered was that his blade be red with blood, dripping in chunks of flesh and sated with the skulls of the vanquished. Kroeger's heart surged with the *rightness* of this slaughter, the singing joy that filled him with every sword blow.

His body was wounded nigh unto death, but hideous strength filled him and the red haze before him was a glorious curtain to his killing. His vision blurred and for a moment it seemed as though he were suddenly elsewhere – a broken plain of black ash, the sky a brazen bronze overseen by black thunderheads.

No longer was he fighting soulless machines, but men clad in rough furs with heavy brows and matted hair woven with bone fetishes. They swung crude, flint-bladed axes, and Kroeger laughed as he gutted them one after the other. Dozens, then scores came at him, then hundreds more, each screaming guttural barks of some proto-language that meant nothing to him. He slew without thought, knowing there could never be enough to satisfy his need to kill. He felt as though he had been fighting for hours, but his sword arm was still fresh, his body filled

with reserves of power he knew would sustain him for an eternity of slaughter among the stars.

Without noticing it, Kroeger realised he was no longer killing fur-clad savages, but men clad in uniforms, puffed silk and iron breastplates. They wore cockaded helms and fought with long spears and wooden-handled firearms. Nor was he clad in burnished warplate of iron, gold and jet; but in animal skins, feathers and warpaint. The ashen plain was replaced by a lush jungle of tall trees and rich vegetation, though many of the trees around him had been felled by men with long-handled axes and logging saws.

Epunamun – for as well as his IV Legion attire, he had shed his name – swung his macuahuitl at a conquistador raising a long wooden musket to his shoulder. The shark teeth embedded along the length of Epunamun's hungry wood struck the man just beneath the steel of his helm and tore through the meat and bone of his neck. The man's head parted company from his shoulders and the spraying blood bathed Epunamun with hot wetness.

He blinked away the sticky blood and was not surprised to find himself somewhere else, this time in a mud-filled trench. Splintered duckboards lined the width of the trench and sheets of corrugated metal shored up its sides. Smoke and screams filled the air, and Karl blinked away spatters of mud from his eyes as he heard the approaching roar of voices from somewhere beyond the lip of the trench. He didn't understand them and felt a growing hunger as he looked left and right at the men emerging from concrete bunkers worked into the trench walls. These were his countrymen, but he felt nothing for them but a vague contempt.

Men were scrambling onto the raised firing step, lifting heavy machine guns into position or working the bolts of their rifles. A man ran towards Karl, dressed in the mud-covered uniform of an Oberst and a ridiculous helmet topped with a bent metal spike.

'Move! The enemy are here!' shouted the Oberst, but before he could say any more, the blast of a grenade detonation spun him high into the air, leaving most of his legs behind. More blood sprayed Karl and he fell to his knees as the sound of gunfire exploded from the lip of the trench. He ran towards the screaming Oberst, who lay against the muddy wall, his body a mass of gouged shrapnel wounds and burned meat.

The smell was intoxicating, just like the meat he had cut from the curious gypsy he'd enticed back to his house at the edge of the village all those years ago. The man had fought, of course, but that had only given the flesh an

astringent flavour that made the sense of power he'd felt at every white-meat mouthful grow stronger.

'Karl,' gasped the Oberst. 'Oh God, it hurts… Please God, help me.'

Karl just looked at him, making no move.

The life went out of his eyes, and Karl lifted a handful of scorched flesh from the Oberst's mutilated legs to his mouth. He bit down, letting the warm blood and fatty meat slide down his throat. He closed his eyes, savouring the forbidden flavours as the sounds of battle raged around him. Men were driven back from the lip of the trench by the charge of the enemy, but the screams of the dying meant nothing to him.

Verdun was lost, but Karl knew it was irrelevant who won or lost.

That all blood – his or his enemies' – was welcome.

He ate more of the dead Oberst, feeling the strength of the dead man's flesh fill him.

The screaming around him grew in volume and he heard a cry of revulsion behind him. He spun around, reaching for his rifle, ready to kill anyone who learned of his secret hunger – he had done it before, and would likely do it again before long. Too late, he saw the enemy infantryman thrusting with his bayonet, and Karl's belly exploded with pain as the blade thrust home in his vitals. The soldier kicked him from the blade and raised it to strike again. Karl saw the man limned in the light of fires and explosions. His face was so very, very old and his eyes had seen more bloodshed than any other man on this planet.

The man's dog tags swung out from beneath his torn shirt, and Karl saw a name etched into the pressed steel. At least he would die knowing his killer.

Pearsonne, Olivier.

But before the soldier could deliver the deathblow, a wave of grey-uniformed soldiers crashed into the fighting from the reserve trenches and drove him away in a storm of gunfire.

Once again the trench was theirs, and Karl let out a shuddering breath as a soldier with a badge of the medical services pinned to his lapel approached him.

He knew this man. He was from the same town as Karl.

'Don't worry,' said Florian, ripping open a field dressing and applying it to the wound in his gut. 'You'll live.'

Karl nodded as blood from a cut he couldn't remember suffering ran down his forehead and into his eyes. He blinked it away and–

Kroeger opened his eyes, the full weight of a million lives of bloodshed filling him like a vessel he hadn't known was empty. His body was alive with power,

his every vein surging with energy and every nerve alive with the prospect of harvesting the skulls of the fallen.

The eldar constructs surrounded him, hundreds deep, and he was utterly alone.

Harkor lay beside him, his skull smashed and his body laid open by a frenzy of sword cuts. Falk and Berossus were far from sight, and the eldar ghost machines closed in on him with relentless purpose.

This was death, but Kroeger welcomed the chance to die in battle. A fragment of the last life he remembered returned to him, words said in a million different tongues throughout the ages of the world, but unchanged in meaning since the first rock split the skull of the first innocent.

'I care not from whence the blood flows,' roared Kroeger as he charged the ghost warriors with his sword raised high. 'Only that it flows!'

Light surrounded Perturabo and enfolded him. He was helpless in the grip of his brother, a passenger on this blazing ascent to the surface. Closer than twin souls, they flew through the heart of a world that was not a world and everywhere he looked, Perturabo could see nothing but his brother's reflection.

Polished shards of glass and crystal fell into the shaft from above, the plundered remains of a world that had once been known as Prismatica. How Perturabo knew this he could not say, but he knew it with the certainty of his own name. He and Fulgrim were like bullets from a gun, and their ascent through the void was dizzyingly swift.

And as they blasted upwards to the surface, bodies were falling past them.

Fulgrim's mortal followers, their lives given willingly in service to their liege lord.

Most were dead already, but those who still lived were shrieking with mindless ecstasy as their lives were spent carelessly by Fulgrim's lusts.

His brother laughed and screamed as he basked in the glory of his reflections, each one different from the last, and each more monstrous in its depiction of the Phoenician. In one, Fulgrim was a beauteous creature of pearlescent wings, white-feathered and hung with pearls and silver chains like Sanguinius. In another he was ram-headed, ruddy-skinned and dripping in blood. Yet another showed him a formless spawn of primordial ooze, a rejected mass of mutated flesh, fallen too far to ever live.

A thousand times a thousand imagoes were thrown back at Perturabo, and at first he thought he had stumbled in his thoughts. *Images*.

No, his mind affirmed. *Imagoes.*

Fulgrim threw his head back and yelled, ‘I can feel the power. The Dark Prince favours me with attention!’

Perturabo wanted to answer him, to curse him for his treachery, but he had no strength to give it voice. The *maugetar* stone now set in Fulgrim’s breastplate pulsed with sated hunger, a monstrous, hideous thing of soul-sucking horror that had stolen Perturabo’s life. Looking at it now, it seemed to be an ugly thing, a bauble crafted in a shadow-haunted city of treachery and betrayal, imbued with its power by those who spent their days crafting ways for the living to suffer.

‘Can you feel it, brother?’ asked Fulgrim, cupping his face like a lover. ‘Can you feel the fates aligning? The eyes of the gods are upon us!’

Perturabo *could* feel something, a sensation like the world breaking apart, like the colliding of realities or the end of all things. Was this what the end of the universe would feel like, the destruction of time itself? When gods took notice of the affairs of men, it brought about cataclysms of unimaginable fury, and this would be no exception.

‘I will always carry you within me, brother,’ said Fulgrim, reaching down to tenderly stroke the black-veined *maugetar* stone with fingertips that looked altogether too slender, too claw-like. ‘What you give to me this day, I will never forget.’

‘I do not *give* it to you,’ said Perturabo, the power of his bitter rage giving him strength.

Fulgrim’s eyes turned cold at his response, angered that this moment should be sullied by anyone’s voice but his own.

‘Freely given or ripped from your beating heart, the result will be the same.’

Perturabo didn’t answer, saving what little energy he had clawed back from the stone at his breast. He closed his eyes, shutting out the sight of his brother’s reflections in the tumbling glass, and concentrating on undoing what the alien stone had done to him. It fought him – of course it did, jealously holding onto that which it had stolen – but Perturabo was the master of breaking into places that sought to keep him out.

Some thought that to be a purely literal interpretation of his abilities, but that was ever the way with Perturabo. People were always underestimating his capabilities beyond what they ascribed to him.

Perturabo reached deep inside, to that inner core of his being where iron and flesh became one, the inviolable heart of himself that was his and his alone. He focused all his attention on it, gathering what strength he had left and filling it with his dreams of youth, his ambition and his hatred of what Fulgrim was

inflicting upon him.

The heart of his hatred grew, fed by the trauma of what was happening to him.

And then, what even the alchemists of old had known: *like attracts like.*

A trickle at first, but then with ever greater force, the stolen strength in the *maugetar* stone began to flow back into Perturabo as through a dam with the thinnest crack in its heart.

Such a reversal could not escape the notice of the Phoenician, and Fulgrim turned his black eyes upon him with a mixture of shock and incredulous fury.

'What are you doing?' he demanded.

'Taking back what is mine,' snarled Perturabo.

Fulgrim shook his head and a gleam of golden fire appeared in his hand, the sword Ferrus Manus had crafted for him so long ago.

'It's mine!' screamed Fulgrim, and rammed the blade into Perturabo's stomach, tearing it up through his sternum and into his chest. The pain was incredible, the craft of the Gorgon ensuring the blade parted Perturabo's armour like a plasma cutter through sheet iron. Rich blood flowed from the wound, bathing the Phoenician's right hand in dripping crimson.

Perturabo threw back his head and loosed a bellow of rage and pain that echoed from the distant walls like continents colliding. He saw a shimmer of light above, a ring of flickering gunfire that could only mean they were near the surface. The black void above raged like the waves of a storm-wracked ocean.

Perturabo felt himself cast away like something unclean. His strength and blood were finite things, but with what he had clawed back, his hand reached out for the one thing he knew Fulgrim valued above all others.

He closed his fist and the world fell away.

Falk watched Kroeger charge into the mass of eldar constructs with disbelief, but he had no time to wonder what madness had possessed the headstrong triarch. The eldar creatures took advantage of the break in the Iron Warriors defensive line, and drove a wedge of their troops into the gap. Falk stitched fire over the chest of an alien, keeping his arm steady as the creatures' bodies broke apart under his relentless barrages.

The Emperor's Children were keeping to their own fight, holding their position as if expecting something to happen at any moment. They were taking no part in the fighting beyond that which was required to hold their position. An untenable strategy, so what did they know that Falk did not?

He put the III Legion from his mind as a glancing bolt of fire grazed his

plastron. His Cataphractii armour was proof against all but the closest-range shots and none had thus far penetrated enough to cause him great harm. His power fist smashed through a flanking enemy, the return stroke batting another through the air like a toy. With every step he took, he fired his implanted weaponry and crushed the animation from his enemies.

Beside him, two of the Iron Circle took the brunt of the eldar fire with their shields. Both robots were dying, their ablative plates stripped away and their shields little more than ruined stubs of metal. Within moments they would be nothing but scrap.

Falk kept moving, never stopping to allow the eldar a clear run at him. A ghost warrior fell in front of him and he stamped down on its crystalline skull. It burst apart, and Falk was about to move on when he saw the hideous skull-face in the patterning of shards his boot had created. It leered up at him and Falk stood frozen in place for the briefest moment.

Brief as it was, it was all the eldar needed to bring their weapons to bear on him.

A combined blast of emerald fire slammed into his lower back and Falk staggered as the heat burned him through his battle-plate. A rippling blade of light stabbed up into his armpit, where the armour was thinnest. He roared in pain and hammered his fist down on his attacker's helmet. A fountain of light erupted from the bulbous helm, and in the shimmer patterns of radiance, the skull grinned out at him again.

'Get away from me!' he yelled as the light died.

You are so close…

Falk heard the voice in every shred of his flesh, the voice that was not a voice resonating in his body from the smallest cell to the grandest element of his synaptic architecture. Once again, his enemies took advantage of his momentary distraction to concentrate their fire upon him.

'Stay out of my head!' cried Falk, wading through a knot of enemy warriors and striding back to where Berossus bludgeoned the eldar from his side with sweeping blows from his enormous hammer. The ranks of the Iron Warriors had thinned considerably – barely a hundred legionaries still fought within the sepulchre.

Thousands more remained outside, and Falk wondered if they were under so sustained an attack as well. The vox was dead, and none of his attempts to reach Forrix, Toramino or the Stonewrought had come to anything. Were these the last Iron Warriors left on Iydris? Had the Phoenician's mad designs broken the IV

Legion upon the anvil of his obsession?

Falk felt the resolve of the Iron Warriors strengthen at his presence.

He was the iron in the foundation, the bolt on the girder.

His presence would keep the rust from their hearts.

Berossus fought like one of the titans of Olympian legend, the creatures said to have sired the gods before falling to fratricide. His energised hammer broke the eldar apart with ease and though his rotor cannon had long-since fired itself empty, it served just as well as a heavy club. Falk took care with his approach; it wasn't unknown for Dreadnoughts in combat to lose track of friend and foe.

A warrior with a bland, forgettable face and whose black hair was worn in plaited braids across the centre of his scalp fought at the warsmith's side like his protector. Falk gave him an appraising glance before dismissing him as irrelevant. Berossus swung around to face him and Falk heard recognition in his voice.

'A hard fight,' said the Dreadnought.

'It has had its moments,' agreed Falk, firing off the last of his bolter rounds. 'War as a Dreadnought suits you.'

'Did you see that idiot Kroeger?' said the Dreadnought.

'I did,' confirmed Falk, blasting a ghost warrior with a burst of fire.

'Looks like there might be an opening in the Trident soon,' said Berossus. 'I might become a triarch after all.'

'If we live through this, I'll demand Perturabo elevate you,' said Falk.

Before the Dreadnought could answer, a blast of energy erupted from the shaft behind him. Falk staggered, the force of the blast throwing him into the mass of eldar constructs. Even Berossus was knocked down by its power, and Falk struggled to regain his feet before the eldar creatures were able to close in for the kill.

Berossus struggled in vain to right himself, his weapon arms thrashing and his legs hammering the ground as he rocked back and forth. His carapace was split down the sides and his augmitters blared with angry frustration.

'Damned eldar!' bellowed the downed Dreadnought.

Falk finally managed to push himself onto his front and drag his legs into a position where he could brace himself enough to climb to his feet. With every passing second he expected a blast of emerald light to end his life, for the ghost warriors to finish what this new devilry had unleashed.

He raised his combi-bolter, though its magazine was now dry.

'Get me up!' roared Berossus. 'I won't die on my back!'

Falk looked around in wonder and shook his head.

‘I don’t think we’re dying today,’ he said.

All around the tiny island of Iron Warriors, the eldar ghost warriors had ceased their attack. They stood as silent and unmoving as statues, devoid of animation and the shimmering light that filled their skull-helms dimming like a battery-lumen running down. The tower of light that had blazed from the shaft at the chamber’s heart had vanished, snuffed out as though some great sluice had been sealed in the planet’s core. The blackness above them seethed and churned, as though its perturbations had somehow been kept in check by the river of light piercing its heart.

A dozen Iron Warriors manhandled the fallen Berossus back onto his feet, and the Dreadnought rotated his body through three hundred and sixty degrees.

‘What just happened?’ he asked, his voice patchy with damage.

‘I don’t know,’ said Falk, turning towards the shaft as he heard a rapidly building roar rising from its depths. The Iron Warriors turned their guns on the shaft as a geyser of the eldar gemstones erupted from it. Millions upon millions of the stones exploded into the air, filling the void above their heads with sparkling points of light.

But instead of falling to earth in a glittering rain, they filled the chamber like an impossibly complex map of the heavens, with every star, planet and point of light represented.

‘What–’ said Falk, but before he could finish, two figures shot from the mouth of the shaft like something vomited from the maw of a great beast; Fulgrim blazing and wreathed in heavenly fire, Perturabo held tight to his breast.

The primarch of the Emperor’s Children hurled his brother aside, and Perturabo fell in a languid arc to land with a crunch of metal and crystal at the edge of the shaft. Blood trailed the air in a streaming red arc from Perturabo’s chest.

Falk felt a sense of terror and unreasoning horror fill him.

The Lord of Iron lay unmoving, his body broken and lifeless.

TWENTY-FIVE

He That Was Dead

Dreams of Iron

The Eagle of the Tenth

Lucius sprang to his feet, the first of the Emperor's Children to right himself in the wake of the shockwave from the shaft. His every sense tingled in anticipation, the promise of a new sensation that was beyond anything he had ever experienced. His sword danced in his hand, its blade flickering.

Even the air recognised that an event of great moment was in the offing.

The fight in the chamber of towers had tested Lucius. Not in skill – the eldar ghost warriors were no match for his bladework – but in his endurance of boredom. The orders Eidolon had been given by the primarch were clear, to keep the mortals bearing the bounty of Prismatica safe until their precious cargo had been emptied into the shaft. Why such a task required Eidolon to enact it, Lucius didn't know.

Perhaps it had something to do with his having died once.

In any case, once the mortals had emptied their containers, they stepped into the green light and dropped away. Had that been part of Eidolon's command? Lucius didn't really care.

The fighting had become a series of dull, repetitious combats that tested him not at all. None of the eldar machines could match his skill and he had fought in every style he knew, simply to stave off the boredom of utilising the same killing move more than once.

But now Fulgrim had re-emerged, haloed by millions of the same gemstones as those that rested at the heart of each of the dull-witted constructs. So dense was the canopy of drifting stones that the outer reaches of the chamber were all but obscured. Lucius caught fleeting glimpses of movement behind the mass of gleaming stones, his warrior instinct telling him that he was seeing things there that warranted note.

But his attention was irrevocably drawn back to his primarch.

Lucius saw the Phoenician was no longer the same being as had descended into the planet. He floated in the air above the shaft, which no longer poured its green torrent up to the restless darkness above, but simply radiated a fading glow of dying light. Fulgrim's armour was shimmering with vitality, as though the light of a thousand suns were contained within him and strained to break free. The primarch's dark, doll-like eyes were twin black holes, doorways to heights of experience and sensation the likes of which could only be dreamed by madmen and those willing to go to any lengths to taste them.

Fulgrim's cloak fell away and his features twisted as though his body were being wracked by twin extremes of pain and pleasure. Reluctantly, Lucius let his gaze slip from Fulgrim's wondrous form to the rest of the chamber's occupants.

Lonomia Ruen stood next to him, his envenomed daggers useless against the eldar creatures. His caustic features were alive with excitement at the sight of Fulgrim's imminent transformation, runnels of purplish blood dribbling from his nose and ears.

Marius Vairosean stood just in front of him, his sonic weapon stilled in the face of such wonder, and Lucius wanted to tell him to loose some blaring cacophony, for surely this moment warranted acknowledgement. Vairosean wept at the sight of Fulgrim, his disfigured features pulled in what might have been an expression of adoration and spiteful jealousy. It was sometimes hard to tell, such was the impressive nature of the man's devotion to his flesh-alterations. Krysander of the Blades stood immobile, his face twisted in a grin of pleasure, his hooked tongue sliding across his knife-cut lips.

The Iron Warriors at last seemed to have developed a sense of wonder and stood immobile in the presence of a godlike being at the height of his powers. Even the plight of their doomed primarch wasn't enough to break the spell of Fulgrim's coming glory, for none of his feeble-witted warriors had yet approached him.

Eidolon alone seemed unaffected by the stupefaction that had seized the survivors of the eldar attack, and he walked towards Fulgrim as the primarch drifted down to the edge of the shaft. As Fulgrim's feet touched the ground, Lucius felt a shudder go through the world, as though it rebelled at his touch. It was as if two tectonic plates had ground across one another, deep within the earth, and the titanic force that their collision had unleashed was only slowly making its way to the surface.

Lucius wanted to move, to draw closer to his primarch, but he could no more

move than he could still his own heart. His flesh understood what his desire did not.

This was a moment of birth, and like all such moments, it was a private thing.

Eidolon removed a blade from beneath his cloak – a grey, glitterdust-bladed weapon that Lucius recognised immediately. It was a weapon with which a warrior might slay a god, a weapon that in ancient times would have been called *enchanted*.

The anathame was a shadow of the longsword that had, rumour said, been stolen from the Hall of Devices on Xenobia. Its blade had been chipped and shaved, reduced to the length of a ranker's gladius by a Chaplain of the XVII Legion, though no one knew for what purpose. Eidolon lifted the anathame to Fulgrim's eye level and spoke words that Lucius couldn't hear. The primarch nodded and Eidolon rammed the blade into Fulgrim's side.

The Emperor's Children cried out as one, but the awesome power blazing from Fulgrim's beatific form held them fast.

'He that was dead shall bring me to life!' cried Fulgrim, the pain in his voice bringing tears to Lucius's eyes. 'He that is risen shall be the witness of my rebirth!'

Eidolon circled around and stabbed the primarch again and again, each time driving the blade in to the hilt. Blood poured from Fulgrim, and his face betrayed the agony he suffered with each penetration. Eidolon sheathed the bloodied weapon and stood before Fulgrim. With both hands, he reached for the first wound he had caused and pulled it open.

Fulgrim threw back his head and loosed a bellow of rage that would have shamed Angron with its violence. No butcher's nail had ever drawn so agonised a cry from a living being, and Lucius swore that he would kill Eidolon for causing the primarch such torment.

But Eidolon wasn't done.

He moved around Fulgrim, pulling each wound open with his blood-slick gauntlets until the primarch was swaying on his feet, barely able to keep from collapse. His wounds were not healing, his metabolism kept in check by a self-imposed act of will. What purpose this mutilation served, Lucius could not fathom, but whatever it was, it was nearing completion as he felt a burgeoning power swell the chamber. It was a power now free to make its presence felt on a world whose dead guardians had kept it at bay for centuries. His flesh responded to its presence; skin puckering, nerve endings bathed in tremulous bliss and revulsion.

A potent sense of anticipation built within him, as when the Legion captains had waited to ambush Fulgrim in the Gallery of Swords, only honed and distilled to razor keenness. It was the instant before a lightning strike, the heartbeat before a bullet impact, the fractional pause before a drop pod assault. At any moment, power unlike any that mortals, post-human or otherwise, had witnessed in all the history of humankind would be revealed in all its glory. Lucius knew with utter clarity that this was what had driven the eldar to virtual extinction. They had sought to embrace glory, but been found wanting.

‘Do it,’ said Fulgrim to Eidolon, his face a mask of tears.

Eidolon nodded and reached up his hand. A constellation of spirit stones detached from the mass of stones filling the upper reaches of the chamber and flew to him. He plucked them from the air and pressed them into the wounds he had gouged in the primarch’s flesh. Lucius felt tiny flares of terror and desperation, but each one was swiftly extinguished as Eidolon drew more and more to him and fed them into Fulgrim’s body. First ten, then ten more and more and more until it seemed impossible that any others could still be swallowed.

Fulgrim undulated with the souls of the devoured dead, but Eidolon kept summoning them from the air and pushing them inside the many wounds.

‘No more,’ begged Fulgrim, but Eidolon shook his head.

Fulgrim sobbed and wailed, but for each pleading cry for Eidolon to stop, there was a fervent look in his eyes that said, *more*.

But at last Eidolon was done and Lucius let out a long, juddering breath.

‘One more,’ breathed Fulgrim. ‘The *maugetar* stone.’

Eidolon hesitated, circling his wracked primarch, examining every bloodied crevice on his armour.

‘Hurry!’ cried Fulgrim. ‘It must be now! The final fuel for my ascent!’

‘I do not see it, my lord,’ said Eidolon.

‘It’s there!’ screamed Fulgrim. ‘Set within my breastplate.’

And then a voice cut through the chamber, grating and harsh, like stone on metal.

Perturabo swayed on the edge of the shaft, his stomach and groin red from where a deep wound bled profusely. The Lord of Iron’s face was sallow and gaunt, a corpse draped in dried parchment skin and given febrile animation. In his hand he held the *maugetar* stone, its surface a roiling chaos of warring gold and black.

‘Looking for this?’ he said.

Perturabo knew he should destroy the stone in his hand. He could do it easily enough. Just holding it he could feel the strengths and weaknesses in its latticed structure, how much pressure he would need to exert to crack it, to shatter it or to crush it into powder. He knew he should do it, but what would become of him without it? Would the strength it had stolen from him be lost forever?

'You brought me here to kill me,' said Perturabo, walking towards Fulgrim, keeping the hand holding the *maugetar* stone extended over the shaft. The light of the dying green sun shone from far below, and though Perturabo was no celestial engineer, he knew that whatever mechanism was holding this planet from being torn apart by the singularity at the heart of the Eye of Terror was coming undone.

This world's life was about to expire, and he was confident that whatever forces were at work below would destroy the *maugetar* stone.

Was that a risk he was prepared to take to stop Fulgrim?

'You're wrong,' said Fulgrim. 'I brought you here to bring me to life.'

'One man's meat is another man's poison, is that it?'

'Something like that,' agreed Fulgrim.

Eidolon stepped to Fulgrim's side, his hand sliding beneath his cloak.

'Lord Commander Eidolon, if you take one more step, I'll kill you where you stand,' said Perturabo. 'Even like this, you know I can do so.'

Eidolon stopped and looked to Fulgrim, who gave a tiny, almost imperceptible nod.

Perturabo looked his brother in the eye for some hint of remorse, a sign that he regretted that things had come to this, something to show he felt even a moment of shame at plotting to murder him.

He saw nothing, and his heart broke to know that the Fulgrim he had known long ago was gone, never to return. He hadn't thought it possible that anyone could plunge so far as to be beyond redemption. A man might sink to the lowest level, degrade himself beyond belief, but he might yet save his soul if he truly experienced even a moment's remorse.

If only he could believe that of himself.

'You don't know the power, brother,' said Fulgrim. 'I will be able to do anything I desire in the blink of an eye. I will learn mysteries even Magnus does not suspect exist. I will become a god – a shimmering, diaphanous, beautiful creature. This is my apotheosis, where I become a general principal of Being, instantiated throughout all of the vistas of the galaxy.'

'You don't want to be an angel any more,' said Perturabo. 'You want to be a

god.’

‘Is that so bad?’

‘Mankind has no need of gods,’ said Perturabo. ‘We outgrew them a long time ago.’

Fulgrim laughed, though Perturabo saw that the effort of holding his swelling body together was taking every ounce of his concentration. Beads of light, mercury bright, sweated from his skin, dripping from his cruciform stance in silver droplets.

‘Think you so? Then why are there still gods? Belief empowers them and we worship them in every act of slaughter, betrayal, depravity and quest for immortality we undertake. Whether we know it or not, we offer them fealty every day.’

Perturabo shook his head. ‘I worship nothing. I believe in *nothing*.’

The finality of this last utterance almost stopped him in his tracks. The force of it was like a blow, a bitter seed of truth he had never acknowledged or known until this moment. He saw the awareness of it reflected in Fulgrim’s eyes.

‘And that is why you live a stale, bitter life,’ said Fulgrim, contempt and pity dripping from his scornful words. ‘You let yourself be abused; crushed into slavery by a god who doesn’t even have the decency to admit what he is. Our once-father ascended to godhood long ago and denies others their place at the table. He promised us a new world to live in, but he was always to be above us, the master with his loyal lapdog slaves.’

‘It that why you sided with Horus?’ demanded Perturabo, standing right in front of Fulgrim, his enraged features so close that none could come between them. ‘Jealousy? Vanity? Such pettiness is for the weak, we were made for greater things.’

‘What would you know of *greater things*?’ sneered Fulgrim.

‘You don’t know the things I dream,’ said Perturabo. ‘No one does, no one ever cared enough to find out.’

Fulgrim’s head shot forwards and a musk of glittering vapour, pink and veined with arterial red, blew from his open mouth, enveloping Perturabo in its astringent reek; part perfume, part cesspit.

‘Then show me your dreams, brother,’ hissed Fulgrim. ‘And let me make them real!’

The world as Perturabo knew it was replaced by a city he had dreamed into being every night since leaving Olympia. He stood in the centre of a great

boulevard of marbled stone, its width lined by tall trees and magnificent statuary. Clad only in a long *chiton* robe of pale cream and sandals of softest leather, he was garbed as a scholar and a civic leader. He was a man who lived for peace, not war, and the fit of that man settled upon him like a second skin.

The air was achingly clear, scented with mountain pine from the high glens and fresh water from the crystal falls. The sky was wide and blue, streaked with clouds like wisps of breath. Even knowing this was a lie didn't stop Perturabo admiring his handiwork, taking in the rugged vistas of mountainous beauty, the snow-capped peaks and the clean lines of the city around him.

Lochos, the grim mountain fastness of Dammekos remade in the mind of its adoptive son.

Buildings the likes of which had only ever been imagined filled the city, each one as familiar as a father's sons, yet each one an impossibility, for none had ever been constructed.

Behind him was the Thaliakron, but fashioned from polished marble and ouslite, porphyry, gold and silver. All around him were the galleries of justice, the halls of commerce, the palaces of remembrance and the dwellings of the city's inhabitants.

The people of Lochos thronged the boulevard, moving with unhurried grace and contented lives. Everywhere Perturabo looked, he saw men and women of peace, with ambitions and hopes, dreams and the means to make them real. These were the people of Olympia as he had always wished them, clean of limb, hale of heart and united in purpose. They welcomed him, each smile genuine and heartfelt. They loved him and their happiness was reflected in every kind word, every gesture of respect and every warm greeting.

This was his architectural library made real, a city of imagination, of harmony and light; and he moved through its many streets as its builder and its beloved father. It was a city of dreams. His dreams.

And though he could not see them, Perturabo knew that the twelve great city states of Olympia were all like this. Each one was built to his precise designs, logical and ordered, but built in the knowledge that these were places designed for *people*. No architecture, however grand, however lofty in ambition or scale, could ever call itself successful if one forgot that cardinal rule, and Perturabo had never forgotten it.

He walked the streets, knowing he was being manipulated, but not caring.

What man would not wish to look upon his dreams as reality?

The city opened up before him, its beauty and street plan intuitive and

beguiling. It led him to wonders he had almost forgotten he had crafted on the pages of his many sketchbooks; youthful follies, adolescent vanities and mature structures that spoke of long apprenticeships served at the draughting table.

At length, his perambulations brought him to an octagonal space in the centre of the city, a place of gathering and chance encounters, a place where so often a wanderer's footsteps would carry him without even realising it. Shops of craftsmen and vendors of pastries, fresh meat and produce lined the edges of the space, and at its centre was the towering statue of a warrior in burnished warplate, a lightning bolt in one hand, an eagle-topped sceptre in the other.

A god rendered in marble by the hand of a dutiful son.

Perturabo circled the statue, a curious mix of emotions churning within him.

'I have to hand it to you, brother,' said Fulgrim's voice from the edge of the octagon. 'When you dream, you dream grandly.'

Perturabo saw his brother seated at a wrought-iron table in front of a glass-walled bistro, dressed in an identical *chiton*. Two glasses carved from violet crystal sat on the table, one either side of a bottle of clear, honey-coloured wine.

'You know, the Romanii people used to drink from amethyst cups in the belief that it would prevent intoxication,' said Fulgrim, pushing back a chair with his foot and gesturing to the empty seat. 'Come, sit, sit.'

Perturabo wanted nothing more than to wrap his hands around Fulgrim's neck and snap it like a thin spar of wood. But in a place of illusions what would be the point? Instead, he took the seat opposite his brother as Fulgrim poured two glasses of wine.

'Absolute nonsense, of course,' continued Fulgrim, 'but you can't fault people for believing in things when they don't know any better, can you?'

Perturabo said nothing and took a drink. A sweet wine from the vineyards on the slopes of the Ithearak Mountains to the south. His favourite, but of course it would be. Why would a dream of perfection be otherwise?

'Just look at this place,' said Fulgrim, leaning back in his seat and sweeping a hand around to encompass the octagon and the city beyond. 'I never knew you had such *vision*.'

'What are you doing, Fulgrim? We should be settling this like warriors.'

'But we are not warriors, brother,' said Fulgrim, brushing an imaginary speck from his *chiton*. 'In your ideal world we are diplomats, and we settle our disputes with words, yes?'

'I think it's too late for that.'

'Not at all. I look around this city and see I made the mistake I swore I would

not. I underestimated you.'

'I said you would.'

'And I didn't listen, yes, I know,' said Fulgrim, waving a dismissive hand. 'But look at this place, it outshines Macragge in its splendour! All the grandeur, but none of the starch, that's no small achievement.'

'It's not real,' said Perturabo. 'It never was. And it never will be.'

'You're wrong,' said Fulgrim, leaning forwards as if to whisper some seditious gossip. 'I can help you make this real. All of it.'

'Another empty promise?'

'No, brother,' said Fulgrim. 'I think we've come too far for empty promises, don't you? All we have left are cold, hard truths. And the truth is, if you give me the *maugetar* stone, I will breathe life into Olympia again.'

Perturabo searched Fulgrim's face for the lie, but saw nothing but truth. Still, he didn't believe him. He had been betrayed before by words he thought to be true.

'I'll die if I give it to you. You said so yourself.'

'Isn't that a price worth paying for Olympia's rebirth?'

'Of course, but I'd have to trust you, and…'

'Yes, I *have* made it a little difficult for you trust me, haven't I?' grinned Fulgrim.

'Impossible is the word I'd use.'

Fulgrim poured two more glasses of wine. 'Very well, let me put it like this – think of all the people who have scorned you. Dorn, the Khan, the Lion… They all look down on you, they all think you and your sons are nothing but diggers. You became nothing more than the Legion to call when there was dirty work to be done and they didn't want to get down in the mud.'

'You thought the same, as I recall,' pointed out Perturabo.

'True, but now I've seen this city, I perceive the error of my ways,' said Fulgrim. 'This is a perfect city, brother, one I myself might have conceived, but I did not. You did. Of course, you know that the others were repulsed by what happened here? They despised you for it, laughed at you for failing to hold onto your adopted homeworld. I can give you the power to rebuild it, to make it so that it might as well never have happened. All you have to do is give me the *maugetar* stone. Or not; I can do this without it.'

Perturabo heard the lie in Fulgrim's words, sensing his brother's fear that this moment might pass unfulfilled. Even in this fantasy, he felt the unique confluence of energies crossing in the sepulchre, a conjunction of the spheres

that would never come again.

‘Think of it, brother, together we can make Olympia rise from the ashes of its destruction like the phoenix of antiquity.’

‘Olympia is dead, Fulgrim,’ said Perturabo. ‘I killed it, and the dead stay dead, no matter what power you think you’ll get.’

Fulgrim leaned across the table and rested his hand on Perturabo’s arm.

‘Brother, think hard on all that you have lost, all that you have sacrificed,’ said Fulgrim, his dark eyes swirling with the light of distant galaxies. ‘I can give you all that you want.’

‘Maybe you can give me what I want,’ said Perturabo sadly, ‘but you can never give me what I need.’

‘And what is that?’ sneered Fulgrim. ‘Punishment?’

Perturabo pushed back his chair and tipped over his wine glass. ‘We are done talking.’

The amethyst wine glass rolled from the table and smashed to purple shards on the ground, the pieces scattering in a curious star shape, one arm for each side of the octagon. Fulgrim shook his head and the skin of the scholar and the administrator sloughed from him as a serpent sheds its skin, revealing the falsehood he was, a brazen liar in the guise of a friend.

Once again, they stood in the chamber of the sepulchre and his brother was as Perturabo had last seen him: naked and squirming with power and sweated light.

Olympia as he had dreamed it was gone, consigned to the past where its people were dead and burned and its future crushed beneath the iron boot-heel of the IV Legion.

‘You should have taken my offer,’ said Fulgrim. ‘Now all that is left to you is death.’

‘No,’ said Perturabo. ‘Not all.’

And so saying, he hurled the *maugetar* stone into the shaft.

The stone flashed gold and black, gold and black, spinning end over end as it arced out into the centre of the abyss. Fulgrim screamed a denial, and with that shrieking cry, the spell holding every warrior immobile was broken. Perturabo’s throw had been a poor one, much weaker than even a crippled old man might have managed, but it was enough.

He watched the stone begin its downward arc, relieved to be rid of the parasitic talisman.

His relief turned to horror as he saw a golden shape dive from the drifting

dome of spirit stones and plunge towards the stone. He saw it was a mechanised eagle, its feathers rendered in shimmering gold, its body a wonder of clockwork automation and lost technologies. He recognised it as having sprung from the same mind as the machines he had built in his sanctum. It seemed he was not the only savant whose works were inspired by the long dead gentleman of Firenza. The bird loosed the cry of a hunting raptor, its legs extended before it and its wings booming as it lunged in the air to pluck the *maugetar* stone in its obsidian talons.

The bird banked around, its gimlet eyes alive with the hybrid technologies of its unique mind. Its wings beat with a clash of metal on metal, angling its flight back to the far side of the chamber.

A barrage of bolter fire punched through the screen of spirit stones and a handful of Emperor's Children were pitched from their feet.

Perturabo saw the veil part, and didn't know whether to weep or rejoice at the sight of warriors charging towards him.

Black-armoured and bearing a mailed fist upon their shoulder guards.

The Iron Tenth.

TWENTY-SIX

A Common Foe

The Sound of Madness

No Pleasure

Lucius was at the edge of the shaft in a heartbeat, but the golden-winged eagle was already too far away for his whip. He pulled his bolt pistol and drew a bead on its golden form. Almost immediately, the bird began jinking and weaving through the air, as though it somehow sensed it was being targeted. Lucius fired, but his shot went wide. Two more shots missed before a fourth finally clipped the edge of the bird's wing.

'Got you,' he said triumphantly, watching as it spiralled downwards.

Falk felt the paralysing lethargy that had held him rooted to the spot fall away, and immediately moved in Perturabo's direction. The Iron Hands were here, and they were advancing behind a screen of fire towards the primarchs. Their presence here amazed him. How had they come through the labyrinth? Had they found a secret way into the sepulchre that Karuchi Vohra had not known existed? Amid the charging Iron Hands, Falk saw a half-glimpsed shape at the edge of the chamber, a slight figure in a long black robe, and his pace faltered as he recognised Karuchi Vohra.

At first he assumed he was mistaken, but then he saw the figure again, and this time there was no mistaking the thin features. The eldar Perturabo had killed in the labyrinth, could he have a brother? It was surely the only explanation, but as he looked closer, he saw that the resemblance was more than just fraternal.

The eldar with the Iron Hands was *identical* in every way to Karuchi Vohra.

Falk threw off his shock and forced himself to concentrate on the important matters at hand. He had no understanding of the subtleties of this situation, only that the Lord of Iron needed at least one of his triarchs at his side.

'To the primarch!' he yelled, leading the Iron Warriors in defence of their liege

lord.

The Emperor's Children were mirroring his actions, rallying to Fulgrim's side as coruscating loops of purple and gold lightning flailed from his body, as though he had become a vast, overloading generator.

An Emperor's Children warrior with blades sheathed in the bare flesh of his chest came at him, swinging a giant, tooth-bladed chainaxe. His helm was an older mark, making him look like one of the techno-barbarians of the Unification Wars. Falk angled his shoulder guard to take the blow, and the screaming teeth bit only a finger-breadth before sliding clear.

'Fool!' cried Falk. 'We have a common enemy!'

The barbarian paid his words no heed and raised his axe for another strike.

Falk punched clean through the warrior's chest, the power fist obliterating his entire torso and leaving only a gory heap of dismembered body parts in its wake. He stamped the warrior's helm flat as he continued, his combi-bolters blasting out the last of his twin magazines. Two black-clad warriors fell into the shaft, the bolter fire blowing them apart from the inside.

Gunfire roared all around as the Iron Warriors came with him, a hammer of righteous fury. Like Falk, they didn't know what Fulgrim and his debauchers were doing to Perturabo, but that it was harmful was obvious. Berossus crashed into the Phoenix Guard forming a cordon around them, and three of Fulgrim's elite praetorians were smashed to bloody ruin in as many blows.

The rest were not so easily felled, fighting with powered halberds that carved great chunks from Berossus's armour. The struggle became a close-range firefight, the fighting warriors blasting at one another with pistols and clubbing with fists and feet.

'Fight the Iron Hands!' yelled Falk, but his words were falling on deaf ears.

He pulled up short as the skull face that had haunted him from the warp took shape in the blood spatter patterns on a smashed storm shield.

Speak with my voice… the glossiaic unspeech…

Falk's anger brimmed over; anger at the Iron Hands, at the Emperor's Children, but most of all at the sheer stupidity of disunity. This fight needed a warrior who could take charge, a warrior whose words would be obeyed.

'Fight the Iron Hands!' he yelled, and those warriors nearest him recoiled at the force of his words, seals popping on their gorgets and paint blistering on their armour. Those without helms staggered as their gag reflex brought up the oily, acidic contents of their stomachs.

For a fraction of the smallest moment, they stared at him in awe and fear.

And then they obeyed.

Kroeger put aside his heedless smashing of the motionless eldar constructs at the sight of the Iron Hands, feeling the red fog in his mind disperse enough for him to see that a greater enemy had presented itself. He stood atop a heap of shattered glass and broken eldar remains.

He could remember nothing of the slaughters that had seen them destroyed, and that complete loss of control shocked him. The Iron Warriors were hard fighters, but they were no screaming berserkers. Not for them the unshackled fury of Angron's World Eaters – that way lay madness, and Kroeger would not surrender to such an irreversible course. He still felt the lure of complete surrender, but clamped down on it with a whispered recitation of the Unbreakable Litany.

'From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron,' he said. 'And may it ever be so.'

He took deep breaths, feeling the bonds of control clamping down on his beating aggression. It still lurked in the heart of him, but it was his to command, his to release or his to ignore.

For now.

Kroeger began running to where Barban Falk led a cadre of Iron Warriors and Emperor's Children against the Iron Hands.

Marius Vairosean ripped his hand across the firing frets of his sonic cannon, playing the shrieking harmonics over the Iron Hands. They were advancing in the cover of the towers, but his weapon blazed through them with caroming detonations. One warrior was torn apart, the force of the impact vibrations ripping both his arms from their sockets and pulping his head like an eggshell. Another's armour went into resonant frequency shock and reduced his flesh and bone to liquid paste.

He laughed to see such death, hammering his hand down again and again, sending out ripping chords of dissonant frequency blasts. Everywhere he aimed, the ground erupted in fissuring gouges. Enemy warriors were flung away by the screaming power. He and the few Kakophoni still alive paid no heed to the Iron Warrior with the booming voice, though the piercing violence of it had pleased Marius greatly.

More focused than Eidolon's sonic shriek, but less painful, and therefore less

stimulating.

Though his senses had been heightened in almost every way by the ministrations of Fabius, Marius had lost none of his tactical acumen, and saw that the Iron Hands had the best of this conflict so far.

They were fresh into the battle, whereas the Iron Warriors and Emperor's Children had already fought a deadly enemy, and their ammunition stocks were depleted, their numbers diminished and their primarchs unable to fight. The black-armoured warriors were fighting in smaller kill teams, moving implacably forwards under the withering fire from a braying Dreadnought. Its bolter and flamer bathed the chamber in strobing muzzle flare and whooshing gouts of promethium. It advanced over a flaming avenue of broken eldar bodies, unstoppable and immense. Marius looked for the Iron Warriors Dreadnought, and grinned lopsidedly as he saw it fighting through the towers to reach its enemy twin.

A group of Iron Hands broke from cover, a leader and a combat cell with a bulky cannon weapon, and Marius stepped out into the open with his three Kakophoni. He played a shrieking burst of soundwaves and blistering powered chords. Three of the warriors went down, scattered but not dead.

A fourth rolled to his feet and aimed a long, custom-designed carbine at Marius.

The shot punched through the weapon Marius had fashioned from the instruments designed by Bequa Kynska for her *Maraviglia*, and a wailing explosion of clashing harmonics exploded outwards; the death scream of a living being. He hurled the dying device aside as the looming form of the Iron Hands Dreadnought hove into view.

A hurricane of shells slammed into him, punching him from his feet and ripping through his Kakophoni. They died screaming, revelling in the sounds of their own death. Blood pooled in Marius's armour, but he welcomed the sensation. It had been too long since he had felt real pain, and orgasmic synaptic connections exploded in his cortex, stimulating him beyond all reason.

He surged to his feet, the muscles and bones in his jaw distending and reshaping in readiness. The warrior with the carbine flicked a selector switch on the weapon's stock, but before he could fire, Marius drew breath and unleashed a shrieking blast of sound from his swelling lungs and altered trachea. The warrior, an Iron Father he now saw, fell back, clutching his helmet as the deafening, ear-bursting volume of Marius's shout overloaded his battle armour's auto-senses before they could protect him.

Even the Dreadnought rocked back under the sonic force, its aural receptors exploding in a shower of cascading sparks. That would dis-orientate it long enough for Marius to finish the legionaries under its protection and move on.

Marius's face moved with grotesque, fleshy undulations, drawing a huge amount of air into his lungs for another sonic exhalation. One of the warriors climbed to his feet, his armour torn and scorched almost bare of paint. Reeling, the warrior staggered under the weight of a heavy volkite cannon. He struggled with the unfamiliar weapon, hauling on arming levers and charging cranks. The gun's tip crackled with building energy, but such a powerful weapon took time to fire.

Time this warrior didn't have.

Marius spread his arms and leaned into his screaming bellow.

The air between the two warriors fractured with sonic detonations, a jagged haze of noise that filled the chamber and shattered hundreds of spirit stones floating above the battle. Marius screamed until his lungs were emptied, the cathartic sound of madness setting his brain afire with blistering sensations of pleasure, pain and ecstatic joy.

Incredibly, impossibly, the warrior remained standing.

'What?' said Ignatius Numen grimly. 'I didn't catch that.'

Marius ballooned his lungs for another shriek of power.

Deaf to all sound, the Morlock triggered the volkite cannon.

The searing ray punched through Marius Vairosean's breastplate, and explosively boiled his flesh and blood in the blink of an eye.

He didn't even have breath to scream.

Picking his way between the knots of fighting legionaries, Lucius spied the struggling form of the golden bird. It lay in a pile of broken crystal twenty metres away, its wing shattered and one leg bent back at an unnatural angle. The black and gold gemstone Fulgrim coveted lay beside its crumpled beak, and Lucius took a moment to wonder whether such automata could feel pain.

A scuffle of boots on loose stone and crystal sounded behind him, careless and club-footed. Lonomia Ruen dropped into the cover of a collapsed pillar with him, a dripping dagger held in one hand, a needle pistol in the other.

'What is that stone?' asked Ruen.

Lucius didn't bother to hide his irritation at Ruen's presence, and ignored the question.

He didn't know what was so important about it, but that Fulgrim desired it was

enough for him. A darting shape moved through the shadows before him, and Lucius squinted through the misty haze of green fog and gunsmoke. Something was out there, but he couldn't see it properly. Even his genhanced acuity, further sharpened by the spatial rewiring of the sensory centres of his brain, couldn't pick out what it was.

It was a shadow where no shadows should be, a ghost out of place on a world of ghosts.

Lucius smiled as comprehension dawned.

'Ruen,' he said, nodding in the direction of the downed eagle. 'You see that?'

'What?' said Ruen, scrambling to the edge of the pillar and peering round its broken stub.

'There,' said Lucius. 'Quickly.'

'I don't see anyth–' said Ruen before a tiny *thip, thip* sounded and the back of his helmet blew out. He slumped over onto his side, both eye lenses shattered and scorched.

'Idiot,' said Lucius, swinging his bolter up over the pillar and aiming at the point where he'd seen the tiny, telltale flash of the needler. Most observers wouldn't have seen the weapon's las-flare, concealed within a shadow and shrouded by fallen debris.

But Lucius wasn't *most observers.*

The Raven Guard would already be displacing, but Lucius could give him something to force his head down: bolt shells stitched a percussive path through the shadow. He kept firing as he vaulted the fallen pillar and ran towards the fallen eagle. Solid needle rounds puffed the ground behind him in a blitzing series of innocuous-sounding impacts.

Lucius dived over the fallen remains of an eldar construct and scooped up the gold and black gemstone. It was heavier than it looked, the weight in his palm considerable and the heat that it exuded made it feel like it had been left in an oven overnight. That heat flowed through him, and the feeling of immortal vitality that saturated his flesh was so intense that he almost cried out.

'No wonder Fulgrim wants this,' he said, holstering his pistol and drawing his sword.

As soon as the blade was in his hand, a black shape streaked from the shadow of a nearby tower on a near-silent plume of whooshing jet-flame.

Shots hammered Lucius's chest, but failed to penetrate. He dived to the side and brought his blade up in a slashing motion that sheared the barrel from the weapon in a cracking shower of non-reflective ceramite. The Raven Guard

twisted in mid-air, dropping lightly to his feet and throwing aside the ruined halves of his weapon.

‘You bring a needle-carbine to a sword fight?’ sneered Lucius.

Once again his opponent triggered his jump pack, shooting forwards to deliver a thunderous kick to the centre of Lucius’s breastplate. Lucius was hurled back, hearing the crack of splitting plasteel. The Raven Guard sprang at him with his twin black swords extended before him. Lucius rolled aside and sprang to his feet in time to block a downward cut, and scissored his body to avoid a disembowelling slash to the gut. His own sword lanced down to the Raven Guard’s neck, but a burst of thrust carried the warrior away again.

Lucius unhooked the whip he’d taken from dead Kalimos, letting the barbed length of it uncoil like a hungry snake.

‘Just me and thee now,’ said Lucius, removing his helmet and tossing it aside. He reached up to a raised weal on his cheek, a scar that should have long-since healed, but which had been kept raw and marked with caustic powders. ‘You cut me before, and I will always treasure that wound. But that’s all you’re getting, Raven Guard.’

‘Sharrowkyn,’ said the warrior.

‘What?’

‘My name,’ said the Raven Guard. ‘It’s Nykona Sharrowkyn. Just so you know who it is that’s killed you.’

‘Nykona Sharrowkyn,’ said Lucius, rolling the name around his mouth as though experiencing a new flavour. ‘No, that’s not the name of a man that can kill me.’

‘You don’t get to decide,’ said Sharrowkyn, one sword held high over his head, the other extended low. They circled one another warily, each aware of the other’s skill, and knowing they were well matched. Neither paid heed to the battles raging around them, the life and death struggles being played out in the ruins of a dying race’s tomb. All that mattered was the purity of the duel. All other pretenders to this fight were dead, and all that remained to be decided was which of them would walk away.

Lucius attacked first, lashing his whip at Sharrowkyn’s head. The barbed tip scored a line through the faceplate and left eye lens. Lucius followed up with a low cut to the thigh, redirected at the last instant for the groin. Sharrowkyn read the move and blocked with crossed blades, spinning on his heel to hammer his elbow into Lucius’s head.

But Lucius wasn’t there, rolling forwards beneath the blow to thrust his blade

at the base of Sharrowkyn's spine. More flame from the Raven Guard's jump pack carried him away from the paralysing strike, and he spun as he landed to face Lucius once more.

'You're fast, son of Corax,' said Lucius.

'Too fast for you, traitor.'

Lucius smiled. 'You won't goad me into foolishness.'

Even before Lucius finished speaking, Sharrowkyn gunned his jets again. Instead of dodging, Lucius leapt to meet the Raven Guard, his whip slashing and his sword stabbing. The lash cracked around Sharrowkyn's neck, constricting and drawing blood before releasing. Lucius rammed his sword up, but Sharrowkyn's blade turned it aside at the last second, its edge scraping a finger-deep furrow in the ceramite.

They landed badly, the stuttering jets of Sharrowkyn's jump pack skidding them along the ground towards the edge of the shaft. All skill was irrelevant, only brute ferocity as the two swordsmen grappled and kicked at one another. Too close for sword-work, Sharrowkyn rammed his helmeted head into Lucius's unprotected face.

Blood burst from his broken nose and his cheekbone shattered under the force of the impact. Lucius blinked away bloody tears and pushed himself away from Sharrowkyn. He saw the black outline of the Raven Guard coming at him and stabbed his sword into where Sharrowkyn's throat would be.

His blade struck only empty air, and the shock of that almost cost him his life.

Somehow, *impossibly*, the Raven Guard wasn't there.

A blade plunged into his side, and Lucius twisted away from the fiery, unexpected and exquisite pain. He shook his eyes clear of blood and felt the Raven Guard behind him – he spun and thrust low with his sword, but once again his blades cut air and not flesh. Another lancing blow plunged into his back, and this time the pain was an unwelcome sensation. Lucius could see the Raven Guard, but he moved like nothing he had ever seen before, faster than any mortal man could possibly move, like a wraith or a being out of step with time.

A black blade licked out and laid his cheek bare to the bone, a matching wound to the one Sharrowkyn had given him the last time their blades had crossed.

Lucius spun, feeling suddenly helpless as the Raven Guard slipped around him with dizzying speed, his blades stabbing again and again. Lucius felt his sword tumble from his hand, the whip wrapping itself around his wrist as though unwilling to be parted from him, even in death.

Then the Raven Guard was at Lucius's back, pushing him to his knees, blades pressed down through his gorget into the hollows either side of his neck.

'It gives me no pleasure to do this,' said Sharrowkyn. 'You are nothing to me, simply a rabid dog that needs to be put down.'

Lucius tried to speak, to say something to mark his death.

Sharrowkyn's blades stabbed down behind Lucius's collarbone, tearing through his hearts and lungs, severing arteries and wreaking catastrophic damage that not even a Space Marine's post-human physiology could undo.

And all thoughts of a worthy valediction died with him.

Brother Bombastus had a fist that could crush Cataphractii armour, tear open the hulls of Baneblades and rend the steel of hive towers. His flamer burned the Emperor's Children, melting their warplate and roasting them within their ceramite armour.

On any civilised world of the Imperium, Bombastus would have been labelled a psychopath, a dangerously unstable individual who would most likely have ended up in an execution cell after who knew how many brutal murders. Yet those very tendencies that marked him out as dangerously aberrant in human society rendered him perfect clay from which to mould a Space Marine.

Decades of conditioning, training, discipline and brotherhood had wrought as honourable and devoted an Iron Hand as could be expected, but that had all come to an end at the hands of a hybrid alien creature on the inverted deck of a crippled Diasporex vessel as it plunged down into the Carollis Star.

Isolated from the fraternity of his brothers, the psychopathic tendencies that had attracted the attention of the Iron Hands recruiters crept back in like squatters into the mind of Brother Bombastus.

He relished battle. He endured the long sleeps between war and bloodshed, and was first to wake when the machines were empowered and the words of activation spoken. The combat on the *Sisypheum* had been fierce, but short, and fought against monsters. This fight, against fellow legionaries, was exactly the kind of fight he craved. Not for Bombastus the horror and tragedy of fighting his once-brothers. He welcomed it. They came at him again and again, insects against a Titan. Only the warrior Numen had killed with his volkite cannon had come close to doing any real damage. Without his external aural pickups, he fought in silence, which was proving to be more of an inconvenience than he'd expected.

The screams of the dying were as much part of the experience of killing as

seeing it happen.

Then, from behind one of the strange, gem-studded towers, he saw something that sent a jolt of electrical excitement around his iron body. A Dreadnought, one marked with rank bars his internal database identified as a warsmith, no less.

Bombastus strode through the mass of fighting, ignoring everything else in his path as he fought to reach the one opponent that might challenge him. The heavier machine moved with a ponderous grace, its waist gimbal moving in dimensions his could not. Its hammer arm was crackling and lethal, but its main gun was silent.

No ammunition! roared Bombastus, though the words were only rendered as text on the inner face of his casket-visor. He could no longer hear the bellowed challenge.

The Dreadnought turned to face him, and Bombastus read the flurry of activations throughout its armoured shell. Automated weapon loaders sought and failed to find ammunition in the rear-mounted hoppers.

Bombastus sprayed the warsmith Dreadnought with a wash of blazing promethium, dousing its carapace from head to foot. He knew the damage would be minimal, but humiliation was the first part of any killing. He loosed an impudent blast of bolter fire across its carapace. Most of the rounds ricocheted, but one lucky shell caromed from the upper edge of its carapace and blasted a chunk of armour plating free. Sparks flared from a tantalising tear in its upper surfaces; a wound to be torn wider.

Then the time for guns was over and the two Dreadnoughts slammed together with a noise like starships colliding. A fight between Dreadnoughts was not a subtle affair of feints, counters and ripostes – it was a brutal, tearing, barging grapple where the victor was the war machine that offered the fewest openings to its foe.

The Iron Warriors Dreadnought was the heavier machine, but Bombastus quickly realised he had the edge in experience. Whoever had been interred in this burnished sarcophagus was a recent implantee, his skill and knowledge of the weapons, balance and moves available to him limited by his lack of experience. A thunderous uppercut paralysed his enemy’s cannon arm, tearing out the vulnerable servos beneath the curve of its shoulder guards. A body blow rocked Bombastus, but he rode the force of it, spinning around and stepping in to deliver a punishing ram.

A hammer blow pummelled his upper carapace, and a dozen damage indicators flared to life on his casket-visor.

Your height and weight advantage, he bellowed. *I will not forget that again.*

Bombastus pushed hard, slamming his fist down on the Dreadnought's frontal section and driving it back. Momentum was the key. Pounding blows raining down. One after another.

Bombastus caught a flicker of motion to his side, but ignored it as his auspex registered a lone legionary. An Iron Warrior, but one without any discernible weapons capable of causing damage. Once again he pummelled the Dreadnought, breaking its armour open and exposing areas a Dreadnought ought never to expose.

Pinkish fluids and steaming oil poured from his foe's carapace, its machine lifeblood.

A sudden threat indicator spiked at Bombastus's rear as his auspex detected a thermal bloom from a damage-capable weapon. The Dreadnought was still reeling, no threat for now, so Bombastus spun round his central axis, feeding shells into the breech of his bolter.

Overkill for a single warrior, but immensely satisfying.

The melta blast took Bombastus in the centre of his casket, instantly vaporising the ablative layers of ceramite and melting through the inches of armour protecting the fleshy remains that empowered his battlefield divinity. Bombastus mind-screamed within his fluid-filled sarcophagus as life-preserving gels boiled and delicate bio-synaptic receptors were flash-burned in an instant. His motors spasmed in response to his agonies, and his body tilted on its axis as he spun back round.

The Iron Warriors Dreadnought's hammer pistoned directly into the ruin of his casket, crushing the last remains of Bombastus to a pink mulch smeared on the inner face of an empty shell. He did not fall, his body was too immense and too heavy simply to topple over. Instead he sagged with his arms limp at his side, stinking bio-fluids pouring from his ruptured sarcophagus.

'Gratitude,' said Berossus, his augmitters crackling and gapped with interference.

'I am your loyal bondsman,' said Cadaras Grendel, turning the meltagun over in his hands with a newfound admiration.

The noose of battle was closing on the two primarchs at its centre – Perturabo locked on his knees, and Fulgrim hovering in the air as though bound to his brother by ties not even the call of war could break. Sharrowkyn kicked the swordsman's body from his blades and swept up the stone the dead warrior had

been so desperate to recover.

Its substance was a shifting thing, black and gold threads intertwined, swirling around in a complex pattern, like an eternally deadlocked yin and yang. Sharrowkyn had no idea what the gemstone might be; all that mattered was that Fulgrim desired it, and must therefore be denied it. Hideous as it might be to contemplate, it seemed his purpose and that of Perturabo were aligned.

The Iron Hands were mired in battle with the Emperor's Children and Iron Warriors, zipping streams of fire blasting back and forth between them. Sharrowkyn saw Bombastus die as Vermanus Cybus and his Morlocks fought against a group of Phoenix Guard. Sabik Wayland coordinated the fire of supporting warriors and Cadmus Tyro circled around the shaft to come up on the flanks of the Iron Warriors.

He read the ebb and flow of the battle and knew the Iron Hands could do without him for now. He placed the gemstone on a flat piece of debris and pulled the bolt pistol from the holster at the swordsman's hip. The grip was oddly textured, with an unpleasantly organic feel, and Sharrowkyn quickly checked for a round in the chamber.

The sooner he could throw this weapon away the better.

He aimed the muzzle at the gold and black stone.

Sharrowkyn pulled the trigger, and the *maugetar* stone exploded.

Perturabo felt the sudden release of power like a drowning man breaking the ocean's surface just as his lungs were fit to burst. A torrent of iron-edged energy coursed through him; a seismic shockwave of his incredible power returned to him in a flash flood of rebirth.

He roared in the pain of it, for no rebirth was ever painless.

Golden light haloed him, his eyes afire with it and his veins burning with the molten fury of a primarch's very essence. Such raw potency was never meant for such instantaneous transference, and his back arched as his weakened frame flexed to accommodate the sudden, shocking influx of power.

Fulgrim's body arched in sympathetic resonance, for the *maugetar* stone contained more than just the strength stolen from Perturabo. It contained their mingled essences, a power greater than the sum of its parts, a power to fuel an ascent so brutal that only the combined life-force of two primarchs could achieve it.

Armour burned from Fulgrim's body, flaking away like golden dust in a hurricane, leaving his monstrously swollen body naked and his flesh blazing

with furnace heat. Spectral flames of shimmering pink and purple licked around his body, a hungry fire waiting to consume him the moment his focus slipped.

Perturabo slumped forwards onto his knuckles, holding himself erect with the iron in his soul and little else. Even as his strength returned, he felt the weight of it settle in his bones, like a burden he hadn't realised was his to shoulder.

He pushed himself upright, his mastery of the power flooding his body growing with every second. His muscles surged with blood and golden energy, his heart beating with the strength of a forge-hammer. For the first time in what seemed like a lifetime, Perturabo felt as he had when he had first laid eyes on the Emperor.

All-powerful and all-knowing, privileged to know who he was.

Much had changed since that moment, but enough remained the same for him to relish the sense of *rightness* as he lifted *Forgebreaker* onto his shoulder. He flexed his fingers and took a moment to admire the craftsmanship. Horus had given him this weapon as a symbol of their unity, but had he ever expected Perturabo would use it to kill one of his brothers?

Fulgrim saw his death in Perturabo's eyes and grinned, silver light spilling from his gullet as he said, 'You know you have to do it.'

'It didn't have to end this way,' said Perturabo.

'You know it did,' said Fulgrim. 'So make it quick.'

Perturabo nodded and hefted *Forgebreaker* like a headsman at an execution.

The steel and gold head of the hammer's killing face swung in a geometrically perfect arc, splitting the Phoenician's body wide open.

And it was done.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Apotheosis

The End of the World

Into the Black

But it wasn’t done, not by a long way. Fulgrim’s body exploded under the impact of Perturabo’s hammer, and the cry of release was a shrieking birth scream. An explosion of pure force ripped from the Phoenician’s destroyed flesh, filling the chamber of towers with a blinding light that was too bright to look upon, too radiant to ignore. Like a newborn sun, the wondrous incandescence was the centre of all things, a rebirth in fire, new flesh crafted from the ashes of the old.

Perturabo backed away from the light as it grew more intense.

The head of his hammer dripped the white phosphor of unleashed matter and he knew the glorious power he had felt at the destruction of the *maugetar* stone was but a shadow of what was being wrought.

Every eye in the chamber was turned to the light, though it would surely blind them or drive them to madness. Through slitted fingers and shimmering reflections, the survivors of the fighting bore witness to something magnificent and terrible, an agonising death and violent birth combined.

Screams issued from the heart of the light, the most awful screams imaginable. They spoke of loss, of pain, of despair and of things forgotten, never to be remembered. In its diabolical cadences of anguish, Perturabo heard the fear of the newborn emerging from its mother’s womb, the terror of being ejected into a new and pain-filled world, but also the anticipation of that world’s exploration. It carried the rapture of a fleshsmith who knows nothing of the principles of his art, only that he be exalted by it.

Just when it seemed that the agonised, euphoric screaming could go on no longer, the light began to *unfold*, like the petals of a night-blooming flower or an illuminated chrysalis being unwrapped by the metamorphic entity within.

A figure floated in the midst of the light, and it took a moment for Perturabo to

recognise the impossibility of what he was seeing.

It was Fulgrim, naked and pristine, his body unsullied by any of the mawkish ornamentations with which he had defaced his flesh, as perfect as the day the Emperor had first conceived him. The greatest sculptors of stone would have thrown away their hammers, awls and rasps at the sight of the Phoenician, knowing they would never be able to render anything so beautiful.

No trace of the wounds Eidolon had inflicted was visible, and as Fulgrim lowered his arms, his eyes shone with the doom of extinguished worlds. He threw his head back and the millions of spirit stones that had followed his ascent from the heart of the world split asunder with a booming thunderclap. Their incineration spilled sacrificial energy into the light, bolstering it and multiplying its power a millionfold; a flickering web of silver with Fulgrim at its heart.

'I am the whisper of a god that the warp has turned into a shout!' said Fulgrim.

Fulgrim's back arched and his bones split with gunshot cracks. His flesh, once so perfect, now ran fluid and malleable, his form moulding and remoulding as though an invisible sculptor pressed and worked him like clay upon a wheel. Fulgrim's legs, extended like the man of Vitruvius, ran and lengthened, fusing together in a writhing serpent's tail, the skin thickening and sheening with reptilian scales and segmented plates of chitinous armour.

Perturabo took a step towards this thing being born from the death of his brother, all the while despairing that this *was* his brother.

'Fulgrim, no…' he said, but what was done could not be undone.

All around this world of the dead, a world left in the wake of a stellar cataclysm in the hopes that one day its makers might return to claim the last remnants of their ancestors, every spirit stone in every tomb and every crystalline statue screamed in terror as the life bound within it was devoured by the hungry god whose appetite could never be satisfied.

She Who Thirsts…

An offering and a sacrifice, a feast and a fuel source, it was all these things and more, and Fulgrim was offering it all in return for this apotheosis.

Fulgrim's torso split apart and swelled with writhing muscle as nubs of flesh pushed their way from his ribs. Writhing and gelatinous, they grew from his warping flesh like withered, atrophied limbs before gradually assuming the semblance of muscular arms. The new flesh was hued a mottled purple, and hissing venom dripped from the ebony claws.

But worse was yet to come; as Fulgrim was bent double by this agonised transformation, the light drew back into him, veining his body like cracks in the surface of a sun, before exploding from his back in two enormous wings of membranous mist. Insubstantial and threaded with dark energy, they gradually attained solidity, flesh wrought from energy, the stuff of the warp shaped into a form that could be pressed into the material world.

This was no body of bone and blood; Perturabo had destroyed Fulgrim's mortal shell. This was an immaterial avatar of light and energy, of soul and desire. What was being done here was an act of will, a creature birthing itself through its own desire to exist.

An immaculate conception, a creature that was its own mother and father combined.

It was the coniunctio, the alchemical union of spirit, soul and body.

Fulgrim's face was a mask of agonised rapture, a pain endured for the pleasure it promised.

Two obsidian horns erupted from Fulgrim's skull, ripping through in the exact place that the sniper's shot had struck him in the Thaliakron. They curled back over his skull, leaving his perfect face as unsullied as the most innocent child.

'I ascend in Chaos,' said Fulgrim, his voice musical and repellent. 'A prince of the neverborn, a lord of the Ruinous Powers, the chosen of the Profligate Ones and beloved champion of Slaanesh!'

'What have you done?' said Perturabo, feeling the last dregs of life on this world rebel at the damned syllables of that name.

'What none other dared before me,' said Fulgrim, or whatever it was that Fulgrim had become. 'I have been rewarded by my rebirth in the fire of sacrifice.'

Perturabo had nothing else to say. His brother was dead, and this monstrous

creature was all that was left of him. Nothing remained of the once mighty and noble primarch the Emperor had crafted to be his perfect warrior, and Perturabo felt an all-consuming grief that what had begun in such glorious hope an age ago had been so perverted.

'I see it all now,' said Fulgrim, his gaze sweeping the chamber while the light around him began to fade as every spirit stone was finally drained of life. 'The past and the futures, the present and the neverwas. The time we waste here is but a mote in the eye of the universe, a prelude to things infinite and things fleeting.'

Perturabo felt a tremor in the rock, the widening fault lines originating from the planet's hollow core now rising to the surface. The floor of the cavern split apart with a booming crack and the last light of the dying green sun flooded the chamber.

'Farewell, brother,' said Fulgrim. 'We will meet again, and we will yet renew our bonds.'

Fulgrim lifted his hands and a curtain of azure light rose up from the ground like a flare of teleportation energy. It was blinding and momentary, and when it cleared, Perturabo saw that Fulgrim was gone, and with him every one of the Emperor's Children.

His Iron Warriors surrounded him, each one changed by what they had witnessed – some for the good, some for ill, though it was too soon to tell which was which. They stood ready for his command, his loyal sons all. Dust and a rain of debris fell from above, the cracks in the floor spreading to the great dome like fracturing glass. A zigzagging fault line ripped through the centre of the chamber and segments of the floor were thrust upwards as jets of pulverised rock geysered plumes of green dust.

Iydris was tearing itself apart. The force at the heart of the world was no more. The strength of the dead that had kept it safe was failing, and soon this planet would be swallowed by the unimaginable force of the supermassive black hole.

Across the chasm, the remaining Iron Hands gathered up their wounded and fell back from the spreading fissures and heaving ruptures opening in the floor. They looked upon Perturabo with hatred, and he could not say it was ill earned. Had he desired it, Perturabo could destroy them all single-handed. With his regained strength, there was not one of them that could resist him, and they knew it.

Perturabo slung *Forgebreaker* over his shoulder.

'This world is dying,' he said to his warriors. 'But we will not die with it.'

Perturabo turned from the Iron Hands and walked away.

Cadmus Tyro watched the primarch of the Iron Warriors leave, and let out the breath it felt like he'd been holding for years. He knew there was no way they could have fought the Lord of Iron and lived, though it would have been a battle worthy of Medusan legend had anyone been left alive to speak of it.

'They've gone,' said Vermana Cybus, his weapons held limply at his side.

'You sound disappointed,' replied Tyro.

Cybus shrugged. 'I expected to die at Perturabo's hand. Any other death will feel small.'

Another crack burst the ground nearby and more of the sickly light spread from whatever lay at the heart of this planet. Debris fell from above, and slivers of the bruised sky above the sepulchre were visible through the disintegrating structure.

'Then don't die,' said Tyro, gripping the veteran's shoulder. 'Live forever.'

Cybus nodded and turned away to gather his few surviving warriors. The Iron Hands fell back to the walls of the chamber, towards the dark, secret passages of the sepulchre through which Varuchi Vohra had led them. The eldar guide knelt by the walls, his hands sifting the knee-deep dust that was all that remained of the vast array of gemstones immolated by Fulgrim's transformation. Tears streamed down the eldar's face, grief at the passing of a world or something else.

'We need to go,' said Tyro as another violent shockwave bubbled up from the planet's core. 'This place will not last much longer.'

'The *maugetar* stone…' whispered Vohra between wracking sobs. 'That should have been enough for him. Not this… this was too much. Now we have nothing.'

'We are alive, eldar,' said Tyro. 'We faced enemy primarchs and yet we live. Be thankful for that. And whatever weapons they sought here, they're not leaving with them.'

Vohra looked up at him, his face transformed from the bland scholar Tyro had always doubted he was into something cruel and inhuman, a monster that revelled in the suffering of others and the myriad pains he could craft.

'The lords of Commorragh do not look kindly upon failure,' said Vohra. 'You upstart ape-creatures were only supposed to divert them, to keep the fallen ones from understanding the true prize of Iydris.'

'The true prize?'

Vohra held up his hand, letting the grey, inert dust spill through his fingers.

'All is dust,' he said mirthlessly. 'This was to be our salvation, a world's worth of spirit stones to stave off the hunger of *She Who Thirsts*, but it's all gone… The

power to reclaim our birthright. I return to Commorragh to my death.’

Tyro had no understanding of the eldar’s words, but appreciated enough to know that he and his warriors had been deceived from the very beginning. This mission had never been about denying the traitors world-cracking weapons – most likely no such weapons had ever existed, and the tale Fulgrim had told Perturabo on Hydra Cordatus of the Angel Exterminatus was a grand lie constructed to bring the weapons and talents of the Iron Warriors to bear on this doomed world.

Just as Vohra’s words had been crafted to bring the Iron Hands to this place, to keep the Emperor’s Children and Iron Warriors from realising what was truly at stake. But something had gone awry and now the eldar’s plan was in ruins.

‘You brought us here to die,’ said Tyro. Spears of light spilled from above and he looked up at the opened roof, its circumference ringed by broken slabs of stone that spilled rivers of debris into the chamber.

‘It’s all you are good for, mon-keigh!’ snapped Varuchi Vohra, drawing his hands round and above him in an elaborate circle, as if defining the outline of a gateway around him.

Tyro drew his pistol and aimed it squarely at the eldar’s skull.

‘My brothers died for your lie,’ said Tyro. ‘Now you will too.’

The eldar spoke a grating word in his native tongue and a crackling violet light flared from the gate he had described around his body. Tyro squeezed the trigger, but his bolt blasted through empty air. He fired again and again, but Vohra was gone.

Sabik Wayland jogged over to stand beside him, Nykona Sharrowkyn at his side. Both bore grievous wounds and their armour was red with blood. Tyro nodded gratefully to the Raven Guard as he saw he carried the broken remains of Garuda. The golden eagle’s metal body was badly damaged, but he suspected Frater Thamatica would relish the challenge of making it fully functional again – assuming they could escape without the eldar guide.

‘What are you shooting at?’ said Wayland. ‘We need to get out of here.’

‘Vohra’s gone,’ said Tyro.

‘Gone?’ said Wayland. ‘Where?’

‘I don’t know. Some kind of personal teleporter, I think,’ said Tyro. ‘He must have a hidden starship in orbit.’

‘But he knew the way out,’ said Sharrowkyn. ‘I tried to map it as we made our way in, but it was impossible. The paths were all wrong.’

‘Then we go out a different way,’ said Wayland, detaching a personal

transponder from a cavity within his backpack. A winking green light shone from the bulky technology.

A roar of engines sounded from above and an aircraft descended on shrieking jetblasts. A Storm Eagle in the colours of the Iron Hands spiralled down through the shattered roof to hover on screaming pillars of rippling air. Thunderhawks and Stormbirds hovered in the air above the sepulchre, buffeted by storm-force winds.

Through the canopy of the Storm Eagle, Tyro saw Frater Thamatica, who sketched a wry salute through the polarised armourglass panes. As much as Thamatica had earned every punishment and more, Tyro had never been happier to see the wayward Iron Father. The assault ramp lowered on the Storm Eagle and Atesh Tarsa jumped down onto the heaving floor of the chamber.

'Get the wounded and dead on board right now,' he commanded. 'The *Sisypheum* is on borrowed time to break orbit, but we leave no man behind.'

Whatever artifice the labyrinth once possessed to confound the senses was lost with the demise of the power at the heart of the world. Perturabo could feel its embers dying and knew they had little time until the singularity dragged Iydris into its black maw. He led the Iron Warriors through the inert maze and out into the plaza beyond, where it seemed the fighting had been no less fierce. He saw the shattered remains of an Iron Warriors strongpoint, but no sign of any of his gene-sons. The plaza had been laid waste by a merciless bombardment, the kind designed to wipe an area clean of life and leave no stone upon another; an Iron Warriors bombardment.

He ignored the questions of his legionaries as he led them through the cratered wasteland, back through the citadel of the dead that now truly deserved the name. The tombs were all empty, the few remaining statues utterly lifeless and every hint of the shimmering green light that had suffused each building now vanished.

The fortifications at the wall were gone, the Rhinos shattered and broken by shell-fire and the wall itself flattened for hundreds of metres in both directions. The few tombs and mausolea that had clustered near the wall on either side were gone too, pounded flat by a walking barrage that had cleared a path from the citadel back to the landing zone.

They saw no sign of the Emperor's Children and no sign of the Iron Hands. Iydris was coming apart at the seams, deep fissures opening in the landscape and billowing clouds of dust and smoke pouring from the wounds in the planet's

surface. Fading green light suffused the dust, and a tortured groan sounded from deep below as impossible stresses cracked apart the planetary structure crafted by the long-dead eldar.

At length their brutal march pace through the obscuring, sound-deadening dust clouds brought them within sight of the fortifications around the landing zone, and Perturabo was relieved to find that they appeared to have escaped assault.

The walls were cracking from the base upwards, and on any normal world the life of the warsmith in command of such a fortress would have been forfeit. But this was no normal world and the earth upon which these walls had been built was, like the race that once dwelled here, untrustworthy and unreliable.

The gates of the fortress opened and an armoured squadron of iron-sheened Land Raiders emerged, chevroned in gold and jet. Their weapons were live, and riding in the topmost hatch of the lead vehicle was the master of the Stor-bezashk.

'My lord,' said Toramino. 'You live! When Warsmith Forrix called in a final protective fire mission we feared the worst.'

Perturabo nodded, but before he could issue any orders, the weapons of Toramino's Land Raider swung up to bear, their charge capacitors building power to fire. Perturabo spun around, hearing a muffled roar through the banks of churned dust. Toramino's Land Raiders manoeuvred into a firing line, but a familiar tenor in the sound made Perturabo raise his hand.

'Hold your fire,' he ordered as a hulking, battered shape emerged from the smoke.

The *Tormentor*, cratered, holed and pummelled almost to destruction, limped towards the line of Land Raiders. The Shadowsword's main gun had been torn off at the root. Every one of its sponson guns had been blasted from the superstructure and its rear quarters were ablaze where its engine and fuel stores had ignited. Great gashes torn in its side flapped sheets of thick plasteel, and it trailed its mechanical innards behind it in a glistening river of oil.

The engine gave one last bang of internal reaction, and the super-heavy ground to a halt, never to move again. Its side hatches fell open, clanging against its ruined hull and spilling roiling banks of thick, tar-black smoke.

A warrior in armour the colour of soot and bare metal fell from the vehicle's interior, dragging a figure in Cataphractii warplate behind him. The burden was too great for him and he collapsed in a broken heap, tearing off his helmet and drawing great gulping breaths. Both warriors were drenched in blood and scorched by the flames of the super-heavy's demise, but Perturabo recognised

the Stonewrought and Forrix almost immediately.

‘Falk, Kroeger, attend to your fellow triarch,’ ordered Perturabo, before turning back to Toramino. ‘Evacuation protocols. All craft and personnel are to return to the fleet immediately.’

Perturabo’s warriors hastened to obey him as he marched back to the landing fields.

Perturabo stood watching the final death throes of the eldar crone world. He had seen planets die before, cleansed of organic matter by the life-eater virus or bombed to extinction by cyclonic torpedoes. He had even seen one consumed by a rogue stellar flare, burned black in minutes by the raging violence of its star. But he had never seen a world die from within. The surface of the pearlescent globe was darkening by the second, its once pristine surface now sullied by clouds of ejected matter reaching up into the troposphere. Any structures remaining on the surface had long since been obliterated by the growing seismic force of the core-deep earthquakes or had sunk into the vast, continent-sized fissures tearing through the upper reaches of the artificial planetoid’s structure.

The *Iron Blood* strained to break orbit, but the force at the heart of the Eye of Terror was reasserting its grip on reality with a vengeance. Many of the smaller vessels of the Iron Warriors fleet had already been dragged within its embrace, swallowed by the black hole’s powerful energies.

Only the capital ships had engines large enough to resist the inexorable pull, but even they were only delaying the inevitable. The vessel’s Navigators could find no trace of the Paths Above that had led them to this world, and their desperate search for a way out was bearing no fruit.

Behind him, Forrix, Kroeger and Falk awaited his command, but he had none to give.

He was a primarch, crafted to be a god amongst men, but what was he in the face of such cosmic power? Could he demand the black hole release his ships, or turn back the course of time with a wave of the hand? He had great power, but even he was subject to the laws of the universe.

The *Iron Blood* groaned, hyper-stresses deforming its implacable superstructure with shear and torsion it had never been designed to endure. The ship was crying out in pain, its machine spirits filling the command deck with frightened static.

The Emperor’s Children fleet had vanished completely, taken up along with Fulgrim in his ascendance. Even Julius Kaesoron, who Forrix and the

Stonewrought swore blind had escaped the barrage at the plaza with them in the *Tormentor*. Perturabo did not know where his duplicitous brother had gone, nor did he care. His betrayal had turned the last of Perturabo's heart to stone, cementing his conviction that there was only one man whose orders he could trust.

One warrior who spoke without guile and with only noble intentions at his heart.

From now on, he would trust only Horus Lupercal.

'My lord?' said Forrix. 'What are your orders?'

Perturabo turned to face his triarchs, each one of them scarred by the battles they had fought to reach this place.

Barban Falk stood taller, somehow *fuller*, as though imbued with a presence he had not possessed before. His armour was darker, almost black in places, and when Forrix had spoken to him by name earlier, Perturabo had heard Falk say, 'I no longer know that name, I am simply the Warsmith.'

Kroeger too had changed, as though some secret part of him had unlocked and could never now be closed off. His killer's swagger was still there, but it was distilled, honed, now directed into serving a higher purpose than simply the thrill of battle.

Forrix alone seemed to have been diminished by this campaign, the fire that had driven him into the most terrible battles smothered by bitterness. Perturabo knew that feeling well, it was the horror of betrayal, the crushing weight of knowing that there was no one worthy of your trust.

'My orders?' said Perturabo, turning back to the viewscreen, where the monstrous black hole seethed with dark energies. Perturabo looked into its heart, thinking back to the celestial myths and legends surrounding such phenomena, the scientific facts and suppositions of their origins and the wild theories of what might lie on the other side of such a thing.

'I never go back,' said Perturabo. 'Only forwards.'

'My lord?' asked Forrix again. 'What are your orders?'

'We go in,' said Perturabo.

'Into the black hole?' asked Kroeger in horror. 'That's suicide.'

'No, my triarch,' said Perturabo with sudden insight. 'Fulgrim promised we would meet again, and I believe him. We are not meant to die here, and there is only one way onwards.'

Perturabo stared at the black hole, as if daring it to contradict him.

‘This is my order,’ he said. ‘Carry it out. Now.’

Theogonies – IV

He was born in fire.

Or was that reborn*?*

Lucius felt it on his skin, a killing heat that consumed all before it. Fuelled by chemicals and accelerated by an almost sentient desire to devour. His eyes opened, and Lucius felt thrilling pain surge around his body. He was alive, which was something to be savoured, especially in the wake of what had gone before.

Sharrowkyn.

The Raven Guard had killed him.

And yet he was clearly alive.

Lucius remembered the twin black swords plunging into his body in the traditional manner of the executioner. The pain of the blades sliding down through his chest to pierce his hearts and puncture his lungs was a memory to cherish. It sent pulses of shivering pleasure through him even now.

He sat up, touching his hands to his shoulders and finding no trace of the killing wounds, only a smooth layer of skin that felt wondrous to the touch. He sat on a metal gurney in an apothecarion that looked like a madman's laboratory, the walls hung with heavy tubes of gurgling fluids that bubbled and steamed in the heat pervading the chamber.

Fire blazed throughout its length and breadth, a raging inferno set by deliberate hand. Pools of toxic chemicals burned on the walls and floor, spilled from smashed beakers and poured from ruptured vats of highly toxic, highly flammable liquids.

He was not dead.

Nor was he alone.

In the centre of the laboratory a life or death struggle was under way. Two monsters of immense proportions fought with their creator and the master of this abode of the damned, Apothecary Fabius. One of the terata was a broken abomination of crooked limbs, its body swelling with mutant growths and hyper-evolving anatomy. The other sprouted new limbs with every breath, fresh organs

and innumerable unfathomable body parts.

Yet amid all their hideous deformations, Lucius saw Legion markings on their flesh, swollen and twisted by their nightmarish transformation. Whatever these terata were on their way to becoming, they had both once been Imperial Fists.

Fabius fought the terata with a spike-topped rod and a wide-bore pistol that fired streaking rounds. Each impact detonated with virulent toxins, but each one seemed only to make the mutating beasts stronger. Only the flames were hurting them, and their supra-engineered flesh was potent fuel to the fire.

'Lucius!' screamed Fabius. 'Help me! Save the gene-samples!'

Lucius had no interest in obeying the orders of the likes of Fabius, but reasoned that being owed a favour by someone with the Apothecary's talents might be no bad thing. He swung himself from the gurney and scanned the workbenches lining the walls for the most useful-looking piece of apparatus, something that might fit the description.

At length he decided upon a silver cryo-storage case fixed to the wall by a series of coolant pipes and monitoring cables. Lucius fought past the flames, his armour proof against the worst of the heat, but he wore no helmet and the skin of his scarred face was blistering in the heat, and what little hair remained on his skull was burned away, never to return.

The pain was sublime.

One of the terata fell, pierced through by Fabius's lethal maul, its body collapsing under the weight of its uncontrollable mutations. The other was aflame from head to foot, the flesh running from its twisted bones like hot wax. Fabius shot it in the head, and its spine cracked as an evolutionary spurt broke it apart.

Lucius took hold of the storage case and ripped it from the wall. Hot fluids sprayed him from the severed feed lines and the biological stink of it was a combination of ammoniac piss and organic waste. The sides of the box were red hot, and he roared in pain even as his mind lit up with pleasure.

'Go!' shouted Fabius, pushing through the laboratory as the flames spread to the drums of explosive elements. Thudding blasts from deeper in the apothecarion shook the chamber and sheets of billowing flame roared towards them.

Lucius turned and ran for the exit, following Fabius out into the corridor beyond.

Fabius hammered the door mechanism, and the armoured shutter slammed down. Even through the blast-shielded plasteel, Lucius could feel the intense

heat and the percussive detonation of chemical vats.

‘Quickly!’ snapped Fabius. ‘The gene-samples, give them to me. They need to be kept frozen or they become non-viable.’

Lucius set down the cryo-storage case and disengaged the hermetic seal. Vapour spilled from the case as the upper half of the container slid clear. Fabius worked feverishly on his heavily modified narthecium gauntlet, opening a cylindrical vacuum flask capable of holding a number of sample tubes.

Lucius saw a row of twelve zygote tubes, some misted with heat damage and others cracked and leaking. Illuminators ran the length of the case, one for each tube. All but one glowed an angry, useless red.

‘Give it to me!’ shouted Fabius. ‘Now.’

Lucius unsnapped the last tube, its smooth metallic surface scorched and warped, yet the genetic material inside it miraculously still viable. Fabius snatched the tube from his grasp and twisted the pressure cap onto the receiver socket of his narthecium. The mechanism hissed with pressure differential and the containment level dropped until the zygote tube was emptied.

‘Only one,’ said Fabius in bitter disappointment, hurling the zygote tube down the corridor in frustration. ‘All that work, all that time spent, and only one survives.’

‘What happened in there?’ asked Lucius.

Fabius waved away his question. ‘Nothing of any concern to the likes of you, swordsman. I could ask you the same thing. When the Phoenician brought you to me you were cold and dead. How is it that you live?’

Lucius shook his head. ‘I don’t know. Death doesn’t want me yet.’

Fabius gave a short bark of laughter, grim and humourless.

‘Perhaps I could learn something from you then,’ said the Apothecary, staring at him with predatory malice. Lucius rose to his feet, sensing that to remain here would be dangerous. He walked away from the burning ruin of the apothecarion without looking back. By the time he reached a junction in the corridor, he felt stronger and more powerful than ever before, a dark prince among men.

Something crunched beneath his boot and he reached down to lift the empty zygote tube Fabius had thrown away. Its surface was black and yellow with heat damage, but a line of text could still be seen etched onto its side.

Lucius held it up to the glow of the lumens, but whatever had been written there was mostly illegible.

It looked like a name, but one he could only partially make out.

‘Hon… Sou,’ he read.

AFTERWORD

One of the things I've enjoyed most in writing about the traitor primarchs is delving deeper into why they turned from the Emperor and embraced treachery. To walk alongside Fulgrim as he descended into madness and to have stood beside Magnus as his world burned was incredibly satisfying, but they were primarchs who fell through trying to do the right thing. With those primarchs, I'd taken pains to make them sympathetic and have their falls portrayed in a way that made them tragic rather than simply treacherous.

But with *Angel Exterminatus*, I had a chance to tell the story of a primarch who'd gone over to Horus without high-minded notions of perfection or raising mankind to a new psychic awareness. Perturabo *willingly* embraced betrayal because he couldn't see a way out of the rut he'd been driven into and the genocide he'd unleashed. Guilt and shame are powerful motivators, and to avoid facing them, the path of least resistance is often the one that takes you deeper into trouble.

When I was planning this book's outline, I conceived it as a spiritual sequel to *Fulgrim*, a continuation of the Emperor's Children's story, but the more I wrote and the more it opened up to me, the more I realised that it wasn't their story at all. Sure, they're major players in the narrative, but this is well and truly Perturabo's story.

Here was a primarch who found himself allied to the Warmaster without having been plied with obvious seductions of Chaos or the lures placed before primarchs like Angron and Mortarion. Why did a previously honourable warrior like Perturabo choose to destroy what he had helped build? That's what's at the heart of *Angel Exterminatus*, where we see portions of the Iron Warriors back story emerge over the course of their association with the Emperor's Children, a slow unveiling of the deep wound in their psyche.

It's a story that reminds us that even though the Warmaster's forces are allied, old rivalries and divisions that existed between the Legions are still there and are only ever likely to get worse. And Fulgrim's willingness to sacrifice his brother for the sake of his own selfish wants is a measure of how thoroughly he's embraced the Ruinous Powers.

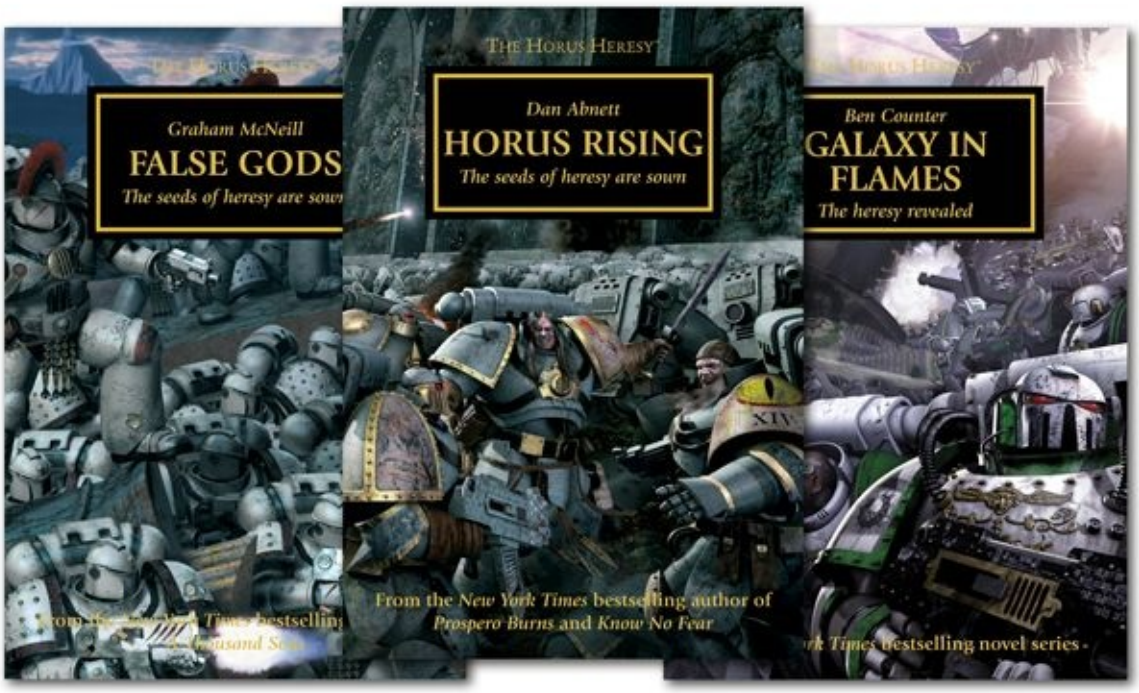
The Dark Prince is a demanding master, but the Lord of Iron is well-named.

And now Perturabo has a score to settle.

Graham McNeill
May 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GRAHAM MCNEILL has written more than twenty novels for Black Library. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 *David Gemmell Legend Award*. Originally hailing from Scotland, Graham now lives and works in Nottingham.



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